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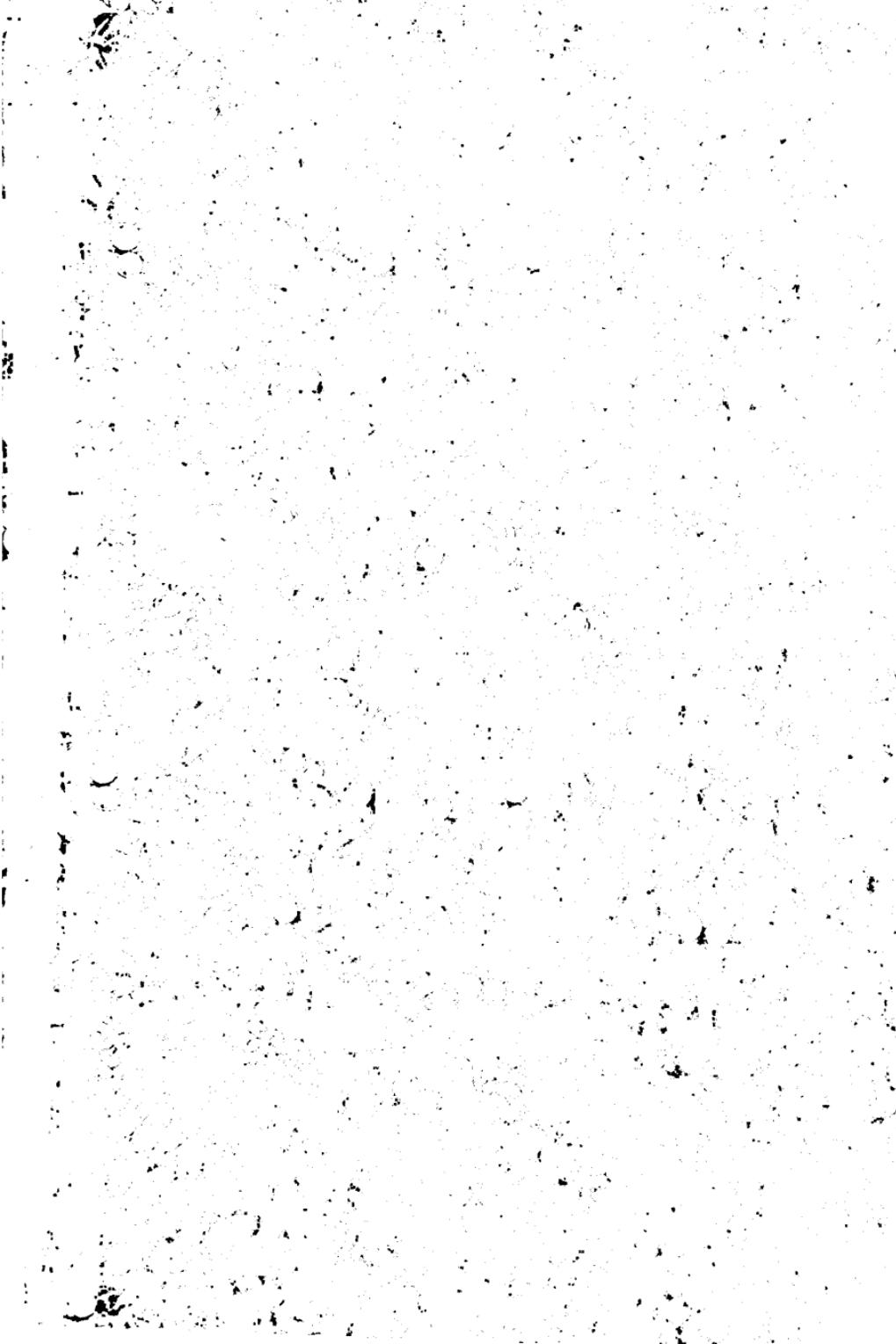
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LADY LOVELACE

A Novel

BY

C. L. PIRKIS

AUTHOR OF "A VERY OPAL," "JUDITH WYNNE," ETC. ETC.



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LADY LOVELACE.

CHAPTER XIX.

“You are expected, sir,” said the servant who opened the door of —, Grafton Street, to Phil, as he showed him into a small room on the ground-floor; a room that seemed a hybrid between a boudoir and study. Books abounded, one or two small writing-tables were stationed here and there, and on either side of the fire were placed large reclining-chairs and foot-stools, suggestive of a lady’s occupation of the apartment.

In one of these chairs, placed to face the door, sat Ellinor Yorke. The light

from some six or eight wax candles, above the mantelpiece, fell full upon her face, lighting up the pure, pale complexion, the full, drooping white eyelids, the scarlet-red lips, the glow of gold in the hair. She was dressed in some plain, tight-fitting black garment, without ornament of any sort.

Phil noted this, as she slowly rose from her chair and advanced to meet him.

“You have come to tell me it is not true,” she said, making no pretence of greeting, scarcely, indeed, waiting till the servant had closed the door behind him.

“What is not true?” asked Phil, trying to get time to collect together his thoughts.

“It is not true that Rodney Thorne died by his own hand;” and now she had come close up to him. She was nearly as tall as he; their eyes were almost upon a

level—her large, full, dark ones were looking straight into his.

“The jury brought in a verdict of accidental death,” answered Phil, meeting her gaze with a look as steadfast as her own.

“And they brought in a right verdict. I say it was a right verdict. I read the evidence, word for word. They were bound to bring in that verdict, and no other.”

Phil stood silent.

Ellinor went on, her tone increasing in vehemence.

“I read every word of the evidence that man—his servant—gave. His master told him to bring the pistols in their case. He said he had sold them to a friend, and wished to see they were in order. He did not know they were loaded, the servant did not know either. The man leaves the room for a moment; he hears

a shot ; he comes back and finds his master dead. It is as plain as possible. It was an accident. What right would they have had to bring in any other verdict than accidental death ? ”

“ What right indeed ? ” asked Phil coldly, clearly, sarcastically. “ Who was there who would have dared come forward and say the man was half-mad, befooled, besotted, and had a desperate reason for putting a desperate end to his life ? ”

Ellinor drew back a step ; for the first time her eyes drooped beneath his.

“ Why—why—why— ” she began vehemently once more. Then she suddenly broke off, took another backward step, flung herself into the arm-chair she had just quitted, hiding her face in her hands.

Phil’s heart began to soften all in a moment. Anger, vehemence, effrontery even, he was prepared to meet, but for such an utter collapse as this he was totally

unprepared. No doubt, if he had been a wise or an experienced man, he would have said, "Miss Yorke, allow me to ring for your maid," and would there and then have taken his leave. Being, however, not very wise, nor overburdened with experience, he took an altogether opposite course ; he went over to the young lady's side and addressed her, gravely, it is true, but in tones from which coldness and sarcasm had altogether disappeared.

"Miss Yorke, I entreat you not to give way like this," he said. "What is past is past ; we shall do no good by discussing it. I have let my friendship for Rodney carry me over the borders of politeness, I fear."

But Ellinor did not withdraw her hands from her face ; she only bowed her head lower, till it almost rested on her knee.

Phil went on, his manner gaining in warmth :

"I had no right to speak to you as I did

a moment ago—as I did in the shrubbery at Stanham. Great Heaven! who am I to pronounce judgment on my fellow-creatures in this way?"

Who was he, indeed, his thoughts repeated to himself, that he should set himself up as a ruler and a judge? Heaven only knew what sins he might have been guilty of had he been born a woman, and above all a woman with a face and figure like Ellinor Yorke's. (Why, as she bent forward thus in all the *abandon* of her grief and remorse under the full light of those eight wax-candles, her figure, in its tight-fitting black robe, presented a perfect outline of poetic, classic grace.) He had been—yes, he was willing to confess it—a little hard upon her, had spoken the truth plainly—nay, more, brutally to her.

He very much doubted, in fact, whether Mrs. Thorne herself could have pronounced a harsher judgment, and as for Lucy Selwyn,

there could be no doubt, bitter as her wrongs had been, they would never have wrung from her gentle lips so hard a sentence as his own had dared to utter.

There was a place for repentance, so the preachers said, for the worst of sinners under heaven ; who was he to say that Miss Yorke was never to attain to it ?

And so he repeated once more in a voice that showed even deeper concern :

“ Miss Yorke, I entreat you not to give way like this. If words of mine have pained you, I can only repeat, I, at any rate, am not the right person to utter them.”

No shadow of doubt as to the genuineness of her remorse or repentance crossed his mind. A man blessed with all his faculties (save that of eyesight) might well have harboured a transient suspicion, but for a man of six-and-twenty, momentarily bereft of all his faculties (save that of eyesight), it would have been an impossibility.

Ellinor drew her hands slowly from her face, and lifted her bowed head. She was white with an almost death-like pallor. There were no signs of tears on her face, but her eyes had a mournful, despairing look in them far more pathetic than the drawn redness which tears are apt to give. Her voice was low and tremulous as she said, half-turning her head towards him :

“ Your words were true words ; you had a right to utter them ; but if ever it should happen to you to have your heart broken and miserable as mine is now, I pray God one may go to you speaking kinder and more merciful words than you have spoken to me to-night.”

Phil began to feel more and more what a hard-hearted brute he had been.

“ I did not think you would take it in that way,” he stammered. “ I ought to have seen—ought to have known——”

“ That I had a heart in my body, though

I did not choose to lay it bare to every chance passer-by," finished Ellinor, speaking in the same low, tremulous tones as before. "You thought I could hear of this man's death—ay, and have it laid to my charge, unmoved, without a twinge of remorse. Even now you will scarcely believe me when I say that henceforth to my very last hour remorse and pain can never leave me, that all joy and pleasure in living is over for me for ever."

"I vow and protest——" Phil began.

But Ellinor interrupted him, laying her hand upon his arm as he stood in front of her.

"Mr. Wickham, tell me one thing; and I shall be for ever grateful to you. What can I do—what is it possible for me to do to prove to you—to all the world that my sorrow is genuine, and that I am bent on making atonement?"

Phil would rather she had left him and

“all the world” out of the question, and simply said: “What ought I to do by way of atonement?” However, after all it came to much the same, he said to himself philosophically; it was only putting the thing in another form. His thoughts flew swiftly to Lucy Selwyn.

“There is one to whom atonement is due far more even than to Mrs. Thorne,” he answered gravely. “Not that it is possible that it can ever be adequately rendered, but the attempt might be made.”

A sudden flush passed over Ellinor’s face.

“You allude to Miss Selwyn, of course.” She paused a moment. “You would like to make me feel I have injured her—you would like me to go to her and beg her forgiveness? Mr. Wickham, I am no saint. I have never pretended to be one, and shall never attempt to be one, and I tell

you frankly that you could not have set me a harder thing to do than to go to this girl and beg her pardon."

Phil began to see his way a little through what seemed to him a succession of difficulties.

"I said nothing about begging pardons," he answered. "I don't see the slightest necessity for such a thing. Where would be the kindness of laying bare to Miss Selwyn the faithlessness of the man she loved and trusted? No; what I meant was, that if you are inclined to do anything to show—I mean, for poor Rodney's sake—there would be plenty of scope for kindness towards Miss Selwyn. She is utterly without friends, has very little money. She is very young, very gentle, very broken-hearted—"

Ellinor lifted her white eyelids, for one moment letting her eyes rest on him with a curious expression. Then she said :

“ Give me her address, please. To-morrow I will call and see her, and if you will call in on me here on the day after, I will tell you the result of our interview, and consult with you as to what can best be done for her. Say good-night to me now, Mr. Wickham. I am very tired—very worn-out. Do not forget, the day after to-morrow.”

And somehow it seemed to Phil that, while she was saying these words with her lips, those dark, passionate, mournful eyes of hers paraphrased them somewhat in this fashion :

“ Do not forget all my hopes of repentance centre in your help and counsel. You, who have stricken me into the very dust with your harsh, cruel words, hold out your right hand and help me to stand upright again.”

Phil went back to his hotel that night in much better spirits than he had been when he set forth from it, tired and hungry though he was, and well might be.

He could not help feeling he had, on the whole, accomplished a very fair evening's work—shown Ellinor Yorke a deed worthy of her doing, and, in all probability, raised up for Lucy Selwyn a valuable friend for life. It did not occur to him for one moment to doubt the genuineness of Ellinor's sorrow, nor the benefit that her friendship, once accorded to the friendless Lucy, would be to her. Gracious and kindly thoughts began to fill his heart towards these two young women, so far apart in beauty, in station, in dispositions, yet somehow linked together in his fancy by a common sorrow.

Now, it is all very well for a young man of six-and-twenty to have his heart filled with gracious and kindly thoughts towards two gracious and kindly young women. Men with older brains and less expansive sentiments are apt to detect in such thinking a spice of danger for, say, two at least out of the three persons concerned.

CHAPTER XX.

"**T**HREE'S one thing I'm resolved upon, at any rate. No one shall accuse me of wearing the willow for Phil," said Edie Fairfax to herself, as, with a marvellous expedition, she put the finishing touches to her morning toilette.

Edie was a mistress in the art of swift dressing. Few could hope to rival her nimble fingers in the rapid adjustment of hooks, buttons, or tapes; none could surpass them. It is true that her room, after the process of robing or disrobing had been gone through, was apt to present an appearance of "most admired disorder," over which

old Janet would wring her hands in despair. Garments would lie here, there, and everywhere; brushes and combs might be found comfortably reposing in the fender; pins by the dozen would bestrew the floor. What did it matter so long as my little lady turned herself out fresh as a daisy, radiant as Hebe herself, in something under twenty minutes?

On this particular morning that Miss Edie had spoken out so bravely her personal objections to that "true plant" "wherewith young men and maids distrest, and left of love, are crowned," dressing operations had been conducted with even more than ordinary despatch. Janet, tapping at the door, had been dismissed with so peremptory a reminder that she should wait till she was rung for, that the old body had dissolved into tears on the spot. And then the bright brown hair had had a vehement brushing, a rapid twisting and

turning, and been tucked up into the tightest and simplest of knots at the back of the wilful little head, while the said wilful little head had nodded sagely to its own reflection in the mirror opposite, and had announced its brave intentions of inaugurating a new *régime* in the days that were coming.

“I’ve made up my mind, whatever happens, I won’t show I’m miserable—no, I won’t—I won’t—I won’t! No one shall come pitying me, and laughing at me all the time in their sleeves,” she vowed as she stuck a final hair-pin in her twist of hair. “Why, I would far sooner people hated me outright, and called me the horridest of flirts, and the most vicious of vixens, than be fussed over, and pitied, and crooned over by all the old maids in the place. The creatures! and after all what is there for me to grow sallow and lackadaisical over? Everything is going on just

exactly as I wished. I made the arrangement, not Phil ; he simply falls in with it as he does with everything I arrange. Next year will soon come round, and we shall be laughing together over it all before we well know where we are. Yes, after all, there is nothing for me to break my heart over."

It was all very well for Miss Edie, in the bright morning sunlight, thus to assure herself there was nothing in the world to break her heart over. Last night's stars ↵ might have told a different tale as they peeped into her bedroom-window long after midnight, and saw her lying face downwards on the floor ; only not crying because every tear she had at command was shed, and uttering neither plaint nor wail because her powers of utterance were exhausted with the long hours of passionate weeping she had passed in the solitude of her room.

Edie had received through Colonel Wickham on the previous day a message

from Phil, and probably to it might be traced both her tears of overnight and her brave resolutions of the morning. Phil's message had run somewhat as follows :

“Tell Edie I shall be off to New York in a day or two—met Arthur Kenrick last week (you remember Kenrick, he rowed three in the Cambridge boat two years ago), and he's just starting to shoot buffalo in the plains. I've told him time hangs rather heavily on my hands just now, and I'm exactly in the humour for a tramp through Utah, or anywhere else he likes to go. But tell Edie she may expect to see me on the 1st of October, next year, without fail”—the last sentence being much underscored.

Possibly it was the underscoring of these lines which brought back hope and courage to little Edie's heart. “There is nothing small in art ;” in a yet deeper sense there is nothing small in love ; a sigh will speak

volumes, a look may tell a whole heart's history, and, as in Edie's case, the under-scoring of six consecutive words may give them the weight of Cæsar's decrees, or of inspired prophecy itself. Anyhow, with a step as light as a bird's, and a face that seemed to have the sun itself shining on it, she went down to the breakfast-room that morning.

The Squire looked up from his paper as she entered.

“The barometer's rising,” he said to himself; “Heaven grant it may last.” Aloud he said, determined to take advantage of the promise of fair weather: “Edie, it will be cattle-market to-morrow; you may as well ride down with me to Green Farm. There are a lot of little Alderneys I should like you to see, before I tell Melhuish to make an offer for them.”

It must be admitted that Edie's whimsicality of temperament, her sudden storms

and sunshine, took not a little of the pleasantness out of the Squire's life, and savoured to him somewhat of the mysterious and inexplicable. He had shambled through life himself in easy slippered fashion ; why in Heaven's name couldn't other persons do the same, instead of mounting themselves on stilts to go down a hill, or putting on hob-nailed boots when nothing but the smoothest of pasture-lands lay before them ?

But stilts and hob-nailed boots were for that day, at any rate, laid on one side. The Squire and his little daughter enjoyed the most cheery of rides together, and inspected the Alderneys in the most amicable of tempers. Even the poor people, as Edie rode through the village towards home, said one to another, " Our young lady looks more like herself than she has for many a day past."

" Our young lady " was the name by

which Miss Edie was known among the cottagers, whom alternately she petted and scolded, over whose small vices she was wont to grow furious, and over whose equally small virtues she was apt to be enthusiastic.

Some one else beside the villagers noted Edie's bright looks that morning.

"She is like an incarnated sunbeam," said Lord Winterdowne to himself, as a sudden turn in the road down which he was riding brought him face to face with Edie and her father on their spirited chestnuts.

Now a poetic simile in the mouth of Lord Winterdowne was an altogether unusual occurrence, and showed him to be in an altogether unusual frame of mind. For truisms and platitudes he had an almost fatal facility, but as a rule when he courted the muses, they shrugged their shoulders and turned their backs on him.

“I was going up to your house”—his horse’s head was turned in an opposite direction—“a—that is, I should have been going if I had not met you,” he said. And as he said this his eyes, not a doubt, said over and over again, while he peered at Edie through the gold-rimmed glasses: “An incarnated sunbeam—yes, a sunbeam incarnated, that is what she is!”

“Delighted to see you at any time!” responded the Squire heartily. “So ho—quiet, my lamb!”—this to his fidgety chestnut. “Anything I can do for you?”

“I was going to trespass on your kindness, if I might be allowed,” was Lord Winterdowne’s reply. “I have been told that it is expected of me to inaugurate the Christmas gaieties in the county by festivities of some sort at the Castle. Now a ball seems to me the right sort of thing. What do you think?” here directly appealing to Edie, who replied immediately

with an energy that made Coquette start, lay back her ears, and whisk her tail :

“A ball! Oh, how heavenly! Depend upon it, it is the right and only sort of thing you could do at Christmas.”

“Exactly,” Lord Winterdowne went on ; “but here is my difficulty — the ball-list! Now, in every county there are people who must be asked, and people who may be asked, and people who neither must nor may. Now, I am too new to the county to be able to make out my list unaided, and——”

“Ah, I see,” interrupted the Squire, who was anxious to set his fidgety chestnut going again ; “you want Edie to run her eye over the list. Come in to-night and talk it over—dinner at half-past seven as usual, or luncheon to-morrow at half-past one — shall expect you. Yes, beautiful morning for a canter! To-night, then— shall be delighted to see you. Good-bye!”

“ I wonder,” thought Edie, as once more, side by side with her father, they set off at a good pace down the country road, “ I wonder if Phil will put off his trip to America, and come down for the ball when he hears of it?” And she mentally registered a resolve that long before the important matter of the ball-list could be adjusted and the invitations sent out, Phil should somehow receive private intimation of the intended festivity.

CHAPTER XXI.

PHIL, however, when he heard of the projected ball, was far more inclined to hasten his journey than to retard it.

“Where was the use,” he growled to himself, “of going out of his way to hunt for disagreeables when he had only to sit still and think for five minutes and up they came, like mushrooms after rain? Why should he take the trouble to go all the way down to Stanham to this wretched ball, unless he had the privilege of saying beforehand to Edie, with a fine air of command, ‘Edie, I intend to have at least every other valse with you,’ or, ‘Edie, I

object to that inane-looking individual you've just been dancing with, and I shall feel greatly obliged if you will snub him next time he comes up to speak to you.'"

It must be confessed that Phil Wickham, just then, was not in his usually serene frame of mind. He was—for him, that is—oddly irritable at times; was conscious—a new experience for him—that he had nerves; resented the consciousness, tried to laugh it off; tried to convince himself that he was developing imaginative powers of a high order; failed in both attempts; was forced to confess that, after all, it was his suspended engagement that was pressing upon him and worrying him, now on this side, now on that; said to himself he would be heartily glad of a good toss on the Atlantic, a spin through the States, and that, meantime, having nothing better to do, he would throw himself, heart and

soul, into Miss Lucy Selwyn's affairs, which, just then, were presenting a series of complications.

In the short, murky November days that were setting in, Phil might very often have been seen making his way to Grafton Street, and, it must be admitted, he never failed to receive the warmest of welcomes at Miss Selwyn's hands.

How Lucy came to be located there is easily explained.

Ellinor Yorke, true to her promise to Phil, on the day after her interview with him, called upon Miss Selwyn in her dreary boarding-school lodgings, introducing herself simply and easily enough.

“I knew Mr. Thorne,” she said, in the softest and most mournful of voices she had at command. “I also know Mr. Wickham intimately; he, in fact, told me how sad and lonely you were here, and asked me to call on you. Now, will you let me

sit here and chat with you for half-an-hour?"

And Lucy, with wonder-opened eyes at the lady's beauty and sweetness of manner, her distinguished appearance, her costly dress—although all of sombre black, the Empress Eugénie might have worn it in the palmiest days of the Empire—could only murmur the humblest of thanks, the most gracious of assurances that Miss Yorke's great kindness was appreciated as it ought to be by her friendless, lonely little self.

The half-hour's chat, however, prolonged itself into a close and earnest talk for at least three times that period.

Long before it came to an end, Lucy had found her way to a footstool at Ellinor's feet, and with clasped hands and swimming eyes was reiterating incoherent thanks for Ellinor's generous and unconditional offer of a home for life, or for at least so long as she liked to accept it.

“I am very lonely at times,” said Miss Yorke; “my mother and sister are out of England the greater part of the year. For reasons best known to himself, my uncle, the only other near relative I have, declines my society; if you will come and share my loneliness, I shall be very much obliged to you. Just now I am staying with the funniest old couple in the world, but as they do not interfere with my movements in the slightest degree, it suits me very well for a time. If you can put up with a small room, and the occasional attendance of one of my maids, I shall be only too delighted if you will come to me at once—to-day, to-morrow—when you will.”

So as Lucy on her part was “only too delighted” to accept Miss Yorke’s offer, her small possessions were speedily packed, and on the next day, with their owner, were deposited safely at Lady Moulsey’s

door, much to that worthy lady's astonishment.

Ellinor certainly did not go out of her way to make the matter clear to the old lady, who from an upper window had beheld the arrival of Miss Selwyn and her boxes.

"It is a friend of mine," she said, not troubling herself to raise her voice to meet the exigencies of Lady Moulsey's dull hearing. "Don't you know you said the other day how dull I must be here, and didn't I know any young people who would come on a visit?"

Lady Moulsey put her least deaf ear forward as one who asked to have a question repeated. She was an old-fashioned, countrified-looking person of about sixty years of age, her face was very much wrinkled, as though time's plough had gone over it frontways, corner-ways, backways, all ways, till not an unfurrowed quarter of

an inch remained ; her eyes were small and sunken, her mouth also. She was much given to stiff, rustling silk dresses, which were Ellinor's detestation, and owned to a perennial harsh, loud cough, equally disliked by that fastidious young person.

Ellinor did not bend her head one hair's-breadth nearer to the old lady's ear. Her lips moved, it is true, slowly, as though she were saying something emphatically and distinctly.

Lady Moulsey shook her head.

“I must be getting deaf with my right ear as well as my left,” she said with a sigh, and visions of an ear-trumpet, an instrument against which she had an altogether unaccountable prejudice, began to rise up in her mind. “My dear, I haven't heard one word you have said.”

And no wonder! for the simple reason that Ellinor's lips had not uttered one word save in appearance.

“For where was the use,” the young lady said to herself, “of straining one’s voice for a deaf old lady of sixty, when a make-believe answer did equally well?”

She had fallen into this habit of make-believe answering on the second day of her arrival at Lady Moulsey’s. She endeavoured to initiate Lucy into the practice on the second day of her coming to the house.

Lucy looked pained and perplexed. She shook her head.

“Don’t ask me to do it,” she said; “I would far sooner strain my voice till it cracked.”

Tenderness to and consideration for old people and children were noticeable traits in Lucy’s character. When Lady Moulsey came into a room, she would fetch her a footstool, an elbow-cushion, or anything she might seem to need.

“Fido!” Ellinor would say with a little smile, “if I dropped my pockethandker-

chief, I'm sure you would run from the other corner of the room to pick it up for me!"

But for all that, Lucy's soft, unassuming ways were not displeasing to the self-engrossed beauty. They made a charming and effective contrast to her own haughty and semi-contemptuous treatment of the world around her; were, so to speak, a tender little bit of neutral tint and shadow which threw into yet more bold relief her own high-toned and vivid colouring.

The chances are that had Lucy Selwyn possessed one tithe of little Edie's spirit, her aptness for retort, her tempestuous temper, life with Ellinor would have been an impossibility to her, or, if not an impossibility, a very hard matter indeed. As it was, far from being a hard matter, it was easy, pleasant, and, next to the early days of Rodney's love-making, by far the brightest portion of the three-and-twenty years she had already lived. Hers

was a grateful, tender little heart ; Ellinor's ready, and, to her way of thinking, magnificent bounty had won her body, soul, and spirit at one throw. To the end of her life her gratitude would be due to this Lady Bountiful, she felt, and do what she would, she could never do enough.

She was never weary of admiring Ellinor's beauty, her grace, her artistic instincts, her exquisitely designed and well-arranged dresses. All that she needed of companionship, of society, it seemed to her in those early days of their acquaintanceship, Ellinor Yorke could supply ; and when, as occasionally it chanced, Ellinor sat a mute and apparently a sympathetic listener while Lucy descanted softly on the dead Rodney's virtues and altogether superior excellences, it seemed to the tender-hearted girl that Providence had indeed dealt bountifully with her in giving her so blessed a home, so gracious a friend.

As for Ellinor the arrangement, temporarily at any rate, suited her remarkably well, and she accorded to Lucy a magnificent sort of patronage she would have accorded to a beggar-girl had it suited her convenience to consort with one. Lucy, in her estimation, occupied a place somewhere midway between her two maids ; possibly she stood a step higher than the light-fingered, somewhat loquacious French maiden who manipulated her laces so dexterously ; possibly a step lower than the sedate, thoughtful Gretchen, who answered her mistress's troublesome letters and arranged her equally troublesome accounts. It may, however, be doubted whether Lucy would have outweighed the beautiful roan Uncle Hugh had presented his niece with at the commencement of the year, and which had been sent to ducal stables to ensure his proper treatment during the winter months. Most assuredly she would

not, had the scales been taken in hand at the commencement of the London season, when Ellinor stood equipped and ready to outshine every other fair *équestrienne* in the Row.

On the whole, then, to Ellinor's mind the arrangement was satisfactory. It set going sundry matters on which she was specially bent just then ; in fact, without this arrangement she did not quite see how they could have been set going at all. Why a young woman of her temperament, who could have secured a coronet for herself with a little less trouble than it takes most women to purchase a new bonnet, should so unreservedly have sacrificed her ambition at love's shrine and have counted Phil Wickham's heart worthy the diplomacy and *finesse* of a Machiavelli and the iteration of a Crispin, adds yet another to the mountain of "nuts to crack" we have piled in readiness for the psychological philosopher of the future.

The fact remained, and Ellinor did not spend her brains questioning the why and wherefore of it. She only said to her heart: "There he stands with his heart of ice while you are beating, burning, tortured, as you never have been before for living man. Very good. Before he is many days older his heart shall beat, and burn, and agonise, and then perhaps you, poor thing, will get a little rest. We shall see."

A clever diplomatist prefers to work with unconscious instruments. One brain guides a game better than two or three.

Lucy proved herself the most unconscious and willing of tools in Ellinor's hands.

A few days after her arrival in Grafton Street, she made her way up to Ellinor's dressing-room with an open letter in her hand, about which she earnestly besought Miss Yorke's counsel. The letter was from the lawyers who were named as executors to Rodney's will, and stated that they were

awaiting her instructions as to the payment of the legacy (one thousand pounds) bequeathed to her by the late Mr. Rodney Thorne. Also they were instructed to make her an offer, on behalf of their client, Mrs. Thorne, of Thorne Hall, of full money value for the furniture, jewellery, and personal property, likewise bequeathed to her by the aforesaid deceased gentleman. The said value to be assessed by Miss Selwyn, or any person or persons she might choose to appoint.

Lucy was ready to cry over this letter. It brought before her mind only too vividly the possible footing on which she might have stood towards Rodney's mother, and the actual hard, formal relation which subsisted between them.

“What shall I do? Please advise me,” she besought Ellinor when she saw that the latter's eye had reached the last word on the page.

Ellinor shook her head.

“My advice would not be worth having,” she answered slowly. “Whatever I advised you in such a matter would be sure to be wrong. Have you no sensible, clear-headed friend—a lawyer, or some man accustomed to being consulted about difficulties?”

Lucy brightened considerably. Her thoughts naturally turned to the only man in her life—save Rodney—she had ever consulted on any matter, small or great.

“There is Mr. Wickham,” she said, “but really I don’t know whether I ought to trouble him so much with my affairs. I know him so slightly after all, although somehow I seem to have known him for years.”

“I know him not slightly but intimately,” said Ellinor, intently scrutinising meantime the pretty lace-drapery her maid was exhibiting for her inspection, “and I know that he is the last man in

the world to make a trouble of so small a matter as the giving advice upon a lawyer's letter."

Lucy brightened still more.

"I will write to him this very morning, and ask him to tell me what I ought to do. Perhaps he will come round and talk the letter over with me. There is something I should very much like to say to him about—about—" "Rodney's will," she was going to say, but somehow the words would not come, so she said: "About this letter."

So before night Phil received a note in Lucy's pretty feminine hand, enclosing the lawyer's letter, and saying how glad and grateful she would be if, when he was passing Grafton Street, he would call in and give her a word of advice.

CHAPTER XXII.

As might be imagined, Phil's answer to Lucy's note was to call on her immediately after breakfast on the following day. He had not been to Grafton Street since the night of his stormy interview with Ellinor about ten days previously. As he lifted the knocker, he wondered not a little whether Miss Yorke would choose to be present while he discussed business matters with Lucy, and, if so, how would she receive him.

He was shown into the same little morning-room as before, and there he found the two girls seated side by side on the sofa.

As he had felt confident beforehand would be the case, Ellinor neither by word nor look evinced the slightest embarrassment.

“Is it business—shall I go?” she asked, after shaking hands with Phil, and exchanging remarks about the ringing frost that had set in, and what the hunting men in Berkshire would have to say to it.

“Oh, please—please, stay,” implored Lucy; “you know everything so much better than I do. I am sure to say something silly and make myself ridiculous somehow, and you can tell me of it ever so much better than Mr. Wickham.”

So Ellinor sat down again; the lawyer’s letter was spread out before them, and the three went into committee upon it.

“Of course,” said Phil with all the gravity and decision of his six-and-twenty years, “the first thing to be ascertained is your own wishes on the matter. No

doubt you have already made up your mind what you would like done, Miss Selwyn."

"What I should like! Yes. But whether it is sensible and what ought to be done is another thing," answered Lucy hesitatingly, growing red and embarrassed as she spoke.

Then there followed a momentary pause.

Lucy evidently had something to say, and as evidently not a little difficulty in saying it. She began and broke off, and began again, and stopped again.

"How would it be to let the thousand pounds remain as at present invested?" suggested Phil, anxious to help her out of her difficulty.

"Oh, it isn't the thousand pounds I'm thinking of; I don't care much what is done with that, one way or another," said Lucy vehemently, hurrying over her words as though afraid even to stop and take breath

lest she might never get heart again to speak them. "It's just this, Mr. Wickham, that troubles me—that Rodney's mother should offer me money value for Rodney's things, which she knows must be beyond all price to me—all price in gold or silver, I mean—and yet, which I would give up to her in one minute if she would only come to me and hold out her hand in love and kindness."

Her words seemed to end almost in a sob.

Phil looked up at her with a little wonder and not a little admiration.

"I see—I begin to see; I didn't look at the matter in that light at first," he murmured.

"And why shouldn't Mrs. Thorne come to you and hold out her hand?" said Ellinor.

She asked the question honestly, wishing for a straightforward answer. It is true

she had surmised possible reasons—she was too quick-witted not to have done so—for Mrs. Thorne's enmity to Lucy, but no one had told her whether or not her surmises were correct, and it had seemed to her, as she had thought over the matter, that Mrs. Thorne was showing an altogether unreasonable amount of personal dislike towards one whom circumstances had effectually prevented from inflicting any permanent injury upon her.

Phil echoed Ellinor's words, though not the tone in which she had uttered them.

“Why, indeed, should she not?” he said, darting a sudden angry look beneath his bent brows at Ellinor.

He felt it hard to keep his temper. All his old angry indignation against her rushed back upon him in full force. How dared she, beyond every one else, sit there and ask such a question—she who, of right, should halve with Rodney the onus of his

mad, desperate career? Why should justice be allowed to miscarry in this way, and this girl, so gentle and defenceless, have to bear the burthen of a deed she had not done, while that other, the real culprit, went scot-free?

Ellinor caught his glance, read its meaning in a moment, and flung it back on him the next, with eyes that flashed and glowed by turns.

“Mrs. Thorne must surely be labouring under some mistake,” she said, speaking slowly and distinctly, as though she were on a public platform. “Nothing but a mistake of some sort can account for her extraordinary conduct. You, who know her so intimately, Mr. Wickham, should make it a matter of duty to remove these misconceptions from her mind.”

Phil felt bewildered. Was this a challenge, or did Miss Yorke’s words mean something he was too stupid to understand?

“If Miss Selwyn commissioned me to such a duty, I would do it, although it might be with reluctance,” he answered after a moment’s pause.

Ellinor turned to Lucy.

“Lucy, don’t you think Mr. Wickham would manage this matter admirably for you—far better than a paid lawyer, or any number of paid lawyers?” she asked, and now there was no mistaking the ring of defiance in her tone.

Lucy looked as she felt, thoroughly perplexed.

“I don’t think I quite understand,” she faltered. “If Mr. Wickham would go to Mrs. Thorne for me, and tell her exactly what I feel on the matter, I should be very, very grateful to him. You see, it is a thing I could not explain in a letter to a lawyer. How could I make him understand that the least of—of Rodney’s things would be beyond price to me—a fishing-

rod—a broken lead-pencil, even—but that— that I would give them every one to one who loved Rodney as I did, if—if only she would give me one little word of kindness."

Her voice grew weaker and weaker ; there came a blinding rush of tears ; she rose suddenly from her chair, and left the room.

Ellinor turned round and faced Phil as the door closed.

" Now that we are alone," she said, and her eyes flashed and burned once more, " you can say every word you have in your heart to say. Don't spare me, I beg of you."

" What I had to say I have said once and for all ; there can be no need to repeat it," said Phil quietly.

" Then why do your eyes repeat what your lips see no occasion to utter ?" queried Ellinor, her small head thrown back, her

face aglow. "Why do your eyes say to me, as they did a minute ago, 'This is your crime, not hers'? Do you suppose I am insensate and stupid, as well as heartless and cruel? Do you suppose, because I do not melt into tears every time Rodney's name is mentioned, and run out of the room, as that poor child did a minute ago, therefore I have forgotten the past, and the part I played in it?"

"I beg your pardon if I have wronged you, even in a look," was Phil's answer.

He was looking up wonderingly at her now. This was the woman he had declared God had sent into the world minus a soul. Well, there was a something shining out of her eyes, curving her lips, colouring her cheeks, which, if not a soul, was an amazingly good imitation of one.

"I thank you for begging my pardon; you had wronged me. I told you I was penitent for the part I had played, and I

was penitent—then. I am penitent now, in a different way, every hour of every day I live. I am sorry when I get up in the morning, sorry when I lie down to rest at night, sorry all the day long. Shall I tell you why—what for?"

She had risen now from the sofa on which she had been seated. Phil rose also, thinking it would possibly be better to bring the interview to a close. Ellinor's eyes, nearly on a level with his, seemed to search to their depths, and question, and doubt, and scorn him all in a look.

She went on, her rich, full tones uttering as much scorn as her eyes.

"I am sorry—deeply, heartily, truly sorry every hour of every day I live, I say, because when I first met Rodney Thorne I did not put him out of my path as I would put any weak, troublesome, irritating animal—a barking dog, a mischievous kitten, a buzzing wasp. You pitied him,

and laid his death to my charge. I bowed to your verdict, and you cut my heart and stabbed it, and made me think what a vile, heartless part I had played. Now that you persist in casting my sin in my teeth, now that you would have it always before me, and have me for ever in the dust at your feet, I rebel against your verdict, I feel that you have wronged me far more than ever I wronged your weak, false friend. Let him be. No one could be his champion but one whose manhood was even less than his."

She gave Phil no chance for reply; as she finished speaking, with a slight bow to him, she left the room.

He stood for a few moments, silent and bewildered. Her words had seemed to smite him here, there, everywhere, like so many little winged darts of living flame. Somehow, as he had stood there listening to her, he had felt himself little more than

a sounding-board to throw back her sentences as she uttered them, so sharp, so strong, so true they had seemed to him. He felt his friendship for Rodney dwindling, going, gone, his sympathy for Lucy growing less and less, under some new, strange, undefinable feeling that appeared to have taken full possession of him.

What that feeling was he did not stop to ask himself. He shook himself together with an effort, found his hat, and made his way slowly out of the house.

Surely the genius of transformations must have been roaming free that morning. The Phil Wickham who came out of Lady Moulsey's house in Mayfair was not the Phil Wickham who went in.

CHAPTER XXIII.

“They who 'gainst stiff gales laveering go
Must be at once resolved and skilful too.”

THE fates seemed all to be blowing one way just then, and Phil was most certainly neither skilful nor resolved enough to “laveer” against them. They blew him straight into Hyde Park, after he left —, Grafton Street. “Surely,” he said to himself, “a stretch over the frosty grass will be the best thing to bring my wits back again!” And they sent whirling right across his path a brougham, in which was seated a lady in deep mourning.

Phil knew in a moment this was Mrs.

Thorne, before even the brougham pulled up alongside of him, and the lady beckoned to him with her card-case. He wished her, to say the least, in another hemisphere, so indisposed did he feel to discuss with her Rodney and Rodney's affairs — a subject which he felt sure would come uppermost —that morning.

Her first words proved to him his conjecture was correct.

“ I was going to call on you this afternoon, Mr. Wickham, to ask your assistance on a matter connected with my son's will. Perhaps you can spare me three minutes now, while I explain it to you.”

She might have been saying “ my son's marriage-settlement,” for the calm, unemotional manner in which she uttered the words. Yet Phil, as he looked closely at her, thought he had never seen a woman more changed by grief in so short a time than Rodney's mother. She had aged by

at least ten years; her hair was white as the snow which lay on the untrodden grass; her fine, arched brows were drawn into a close, lowering frown; her face looked sunken, withered, yet withal stern and hard as iron.

She interpreted Phil's bow to be one of acquiescence, and proceeded to explain her wishes.

"I am just returning from my solicitor's. I heard my son's will was placed in their hands by you, so I need not repeat to you its contents. I need not also, I suppose, tell you how repugnant to my feelings would be the carrying out of such a will. That fact must be patent to all."

Possibly Phil's raised eyebrows expressed that the fact, at any rate, was not patent to him, for Mrs. Thorne's manner visibly increased in frostiness as she went on:

"I think it due to you, as executor to my son's will, Mr. Wickham, to be per-

fectly candid on this matter with you, and I tell you plainly that sooner than hand over one splinter of my son's possessions to—to this young person he mentions in his will, I would contest the matter in a court of law."

"I do not think Miss Selwyn would be likely to contest the matter with you in a court of law," said Phil, wishing to show unmistakably on which side his sympathies were enlisted.

"I am very glad to hear it. In that case I imagine she will be likely to accept the offer I have made to her through my lawyers of full money-value for my son's property in lieu of the property itself."

Phil made his face a blank.

"I really have no authority to say whether she will or will not, Mrs. Thorne. I only know that she has received such an offer."

"But you seem to me—or it is possible,

I should say, that you may have some influence with this young person, and if you would exert it to induce her to accept my offer, I should be very much obliged to you."

Phil kept his eyes obstinately fixed on the crape trimming of the lady's bonnet, and made no reply. The repetition of the words, "This young person," grated on his ears.

Mrs. Thorne went on once more, the slightest possible shade of annoyance showing in her tone:

"Money, I should imagine, must be of very great importance to her. If you would kindly make her understand she may fix her own price on these things, without limit—I repeat, without limit—I shall be exceedingly obliged to you."

Phil was obliged to say something now.

"Miss Selwyn is not one to whom money would be of first importance. I know for

a certainty there are things she would value far more," he said, bringing his words out very slowly, very distinctly.

"And those things are?" queried Mrs. Thorne, as she racked her brains to discover what a girl in Lucy's position would value more than pounds, shillings, and pence, and could only think of rubies and diamonds.

"Kindness, sympathy, love," answered Phil sturdily; "due recognition of her position as Rodney's affianced wife."

Mrs. Thorne's eyes flashed like carbuncles in the sun's rays.

"Stop, Mr. Wickham! Such words are not to be addressed to me. You forget I am in full possession of every fact connected with my son's intimacy with this—this young person."

But Phil was not to be silenced now. The time had come, he felt, when Lucy's name and reputation must be championed.

"You are under a thoroughly wrong

impression, Mrs. Thorne, regarding this young lady. Her intimacy with Rodney was of the truest and purest kind. An angel from heaven—my own sister—might have formed it without disgrace. Miss Selwyn is at the present moment staying at a house in Grafton Street you know something of—Lady Moulsey's. Would this be so, do you think, if what you imagine were true?"

He had it in his heart to say a great deal more. He never felt more inclined in his life to lay the burthen of Rodney's misdoings on his own weak, incapable shoulders; but time and place were not exactly appropriate or convenient.

Mrs. Thorne simply raised her eyebrows.

"I would prefer not to discuss the question," she said icily. "I have asked your intervention in this matter as one of Rodney's earliest and best-loved friends. It seemed to me, if you had any regard for

his memory, you could not fail to see how unfit it was that these possessions of his should pass into the hands of strangers. Do you know—are you—can you be aware that there are in his rooms at Jermyn Street things that have been in our family for generations, and, more than that, there is his writing-table, filled, no doubt, with his private papers? Would you have such things as these tossed and turned over by strangers' hands?"

"By strangers' hands? No—" began Phil.

But Mrs. Thorne interrupted him.

"I see you decline to act for me in this matter. I must do what I can without your aid," she said, as she gave him a cold little bow of dismissal, and signalled to her coachman to drive on.

Phil stood still for about three minutes, looking after the carriage as it disappeared at the farther end of the road. Had he

done the best he could for Lucy Selwyn, after all? Was there not another word he ought to have spoken on her behalf, which somehow his lips had failed to utter? Ought he not to have said, "Not this young girl, but another, dazzled and turned your son's brain till he forgot alike duty and honour"?

These were the questions that rose up in his mind, and which, somehow, his counter-questions of, "Where would have been the use? What good would it have done?" failed to answer satisfactorily.

"I must just let things take their course. Evidently I can't do much one way or the other," he said to himself, as he made his way briskly over the frosty ground. "I sincerely hope they will adjust themselves in a day or two, so that I may be off to America with a clear conscience."

But alas! with or without a clear conscience, the trip to America was not to be

undertaken. When Phil got back to his hotel there was a note waiting for him from his friend Arthur Kenrick, which stated that the shooting-party it had taken so long to collect together had come to a sudden collapse, on account of the death of "some old fellow in the shires, who happens," so Kenrick wrote, "to be a near relative of two of the fellows who were going, and who has left them a lot of money, and some property somewhere or other. It's a confounded nuisance, but I've promised them now to put off our trip till the spring, so I suppose there is nothing for it, old fellow, but to grin and bear it."

CHAPTER XXIV.

To Lucy Selwyn, that day, it seemed as though the face of heaven itself were clouded over. Neither at luncheon nor at dinner did Miss Yorke make her appearance. The latter meal, eaten in sole company with Lady Moulsey, was an altogether dismal affair, enlivened only by the worthy old lady's random answers to every question Lucy addressed to her. As when, for instance, Miss Selwyn, remarking the frequent ringing of Sir Peter's bell upstairs, hoped that another attack of gout was not pending, received for answer:

“ My dear, I hope he'll be punished this

time. He richly deserves hanging, if ever a man did."

Poor lady! she had just laid down her newspaper, relating the capture of one of the Irish "invincibles," who had many times eluded the vigilance of the police, and she thought Lucy must be alluding to that event.

Lucy crept upstairs to Ellinor's room when the dreary meal was at last ended.

"May I come in?" she said, softly tapping.

And to her great surprise, for she fully expected a denial, she received answer that she might.

Ellinor was seated on a low chair close to the fire; the remains of her dinner were still on a small table not far distant, beside which stood the patient Gretchen waiting for the signal for her dismissal.

"You may go," said Ellinor, as Lucy entered.

Then Gretchen and the table of provisions disappeared together.

How like some Eastern queen of poetry or romance Ellinor looked in the soft light of the candle-lamp which hung near ! She had on her afternoon tea-gown of some soft dark brocade ; her magnificent dead-leaf hair hung *en masse* to her waist ; her attitude was that of languor, repose, meditation, her hands lay limply on her lap, her head, with face upturned to catch the light of the lamp, reclined on the cushions of the chair.

Now and again a tongue of flame would leap up in the low-burning fire, and would throw an extra gleam on the pure, pale face, the darkly glowing eyes, the deliciously curved and full lips. To a poet, seen thus, she might have suggested the idea of Day dying in the arms of Night. Harry Effingham, A.R.A., had seen her once in much such an attitude, in much such a

garment, and it had suggested to him an opposite idea—a coming back to life, not a sinking into death. He had asked and obtained permission to paint her thus, in half-reclining attitude, as Alcestes given back from the grave. He had spent six months of valuable working time over it, then, Pygmalion-like, had fallen in love with his own creation, refused to exhibit it, and had hung it in his studio instead.

It would be difficult to say by what vagary of inspiration the face and form of the most selfish woman Nature possibly ever turned out of her workshop should have suggested to the artist mind the ideal incarnation of feminine devotion. Yet so it was.

Lucy gave her one long, steady glance, full of humble, honest admiration. Then she drew a footstool and sat down at Miss Yorke's feet.

“In all the world,” she said softly, “I

do not believe there is another woman as beautiful as you!"

There came a look of pain into the beautiful face, a sudden contraction of the brows, a drooping of the eyelids.

"Every one does not think so," she answered slowly.

The answer startled Lucy. The words and the look combined puzzled her and set her thinking.

"Something or some one has pained you to-day?" she queried, with salves and balsams ready to hand, would only the sufferer tell her where lay the wounds.

"Yes"—a simple, hard, unsuggestive "yes;" nothing more.

"You do not wish to tell me what has grieved you?"

"Where would be the use? I have no wish to set you against the only friend you have in the world."

"The only friend I have—Mr. Wick-

ham ! Oh, what can he have done ? " cried the astonished Lucy all in a breath.

" Only this : he charges me with a deed, a sin, a crime which I have not committed —which I will not be charged with. I have defended myself once to him — I will do it again no more."

" He charges you with a crime ! What crime ? " and Lucy's eyes grew round with the surprise she felt.

" The crime of coquetry, of winning a man's heart for the sake of breaking it. He thinks this is easy work for me, having no heart of my own."

" You—you no heart ? Oh, my darling, where should I be now if you had had no heart ? " and Lucy buried her face in Ellinor's dress, and burst into tears.

" Hush ! " said Ellinor, smoothing the young girl's soft, dark hair caressingly ; " you silly, silly child ; why do you trouble yourself in this way simply because people

do not understand me? Hush, hush! your eyes will get red and swollen again as they were a week ago."

It was full three minutes before Lucy could calm herself. During the three minutes that her face was hidden in Ellinor's dress there arose in her mind, and rested there for many a long day afterwards, a very fair and pleasant picture of these her two benefactors, all misunderstandings between them cleared away, joining hands in that perfect, highest form of friendship which we dignify with the name of love. A form of friendship so suitable between a handsome, generous-hearted young fellow of six-and-twenty, and a beautiful, unselfish young woman some two or three years his junior.

When at length her voice grew calm enough to be trusted, she hazarded a conjecture.

"This — this suspicion, this wicked —

wicked thought, cannot come out of Mr. Wickham's own heart; it is too good and true to have such thoughts in it. Some one must have whispered it to him."

Ellinor gave a real honest start.

"I did not once think of such a thing as that; perhaps you are right," she answered as though a new vein of thought had been suddenly struck and laid bare to her.

Lucy did not notice the start, but went on following her own train of thought.

"He has no sisters, no mother, no cousins even, to put such things into his head. Is there no one else? Ah, I remember——" She broke off suddenly as the recollection flashed into her mind of a certain afternoon when Rodney had shown her Phil's photograph as that of his earliest, dearest friend, and on her exclaiming, "What a great, strong, handsome giant he looks!" had replied, "For

all that there is a little girl down at Stanham who can wind him round her little finger."

"What do you recollect?" queried Ellinor, and she asked the question as though it had a great deal of interest for her.

"I recollect Rodney saying one day there was some one at Stanham who loved Mr. Wickham—at least, I supposed that was what he meant."

"There is a little country girl at Stanham—a sort of cousin of mine—who is playing fast and loose with him, I believe."

"Playing fast and loose with a man like Mr. Wickham! Oh, how wicked!" cried Lucy. "Why, if she went from one end of England to the other she wouldn't find a man to compare with him."

"Take care, Lucy, or I shall begin to fancy——"

But what she would begin to fancy under certain circumstances was not to be uttered. A look of such real pain passed over Lucy's face that even she, Ellinor, the self-engrossed, the self-centred, could not fail to remark it.

"You forget," Lucy said gravely—nay, solemnly, "such thoughts as those can never again come to me. I am as much widowed as though I wore a wedding-ring."

"Forgive me, dear, for forgetting—yes, I know," said Ellinor, rising from her chair to end the talk. "Now will you say good-night; there are two or three things I want to think over before I go to bed."

Lucy also had two or three things she wished to think over before she went to bed that night, and it is just possible that her subject for thought might have been identical with Ellinor's. At any rate, it most assuredly had nothing whatever

to do with her own affairs ; for it was not until nearly two days after this that she had sufficiently made up her mind on the matter of Mrs. Thorne's offer through her lawyers to be able to write Phil a brief, decisive letter.

CHAPTER XXV.

PHIL, when he received Lucy's letter, thought at first his senses must be leaving him, so utterly amazed and bewildered did he feel. He had passed a miserable, restless, ill-at-ease two days himself, doing his best to kill time, and wondering all the while why he was so anxious to slay the old conqueror. He had called upon every friend he had in London—save Mrs. Thorne—far and near. He had visited six theatres and two concert-rooms on the two consecutive evenings, and had come away with as rooted a distaste for modern amusements as any “habitual playgoer” of forty

years ago could have had. Then there had come this letter still further to worry him. What did it mean? Was he mad, or was Miss Selwyn mad,—or was the postman mad, and had brought him some one else's letter by mistake? It was ridiculous, inconceivable, unheard-of! It would have been all very well for a young fellow in the heyday of life, and with a fine fortune at command, to write such a quixotic letter, but for a young girl with nothing but a pittance of fifty pounds a year to depend on, it was simply monstrous! And Phil took up the offending missive and read it through once more.

Thus it ran :

“—, Grafton Street.

“ DEAR MR. WICKHAM,

“I have at last made up my mind what answer to send to Mrs. Thorne's proposal, made to me through her lawyers. I

most positively and distinctly refuse to receive one penny from her in lieu of Rodney's property, to which I am entitled by his will. But I will waive all right to this property, and make her a free-will offering of it in its entirety—just as it stands, I mean. And this I do, not because the things are not unspeakably precious to me, but because she is Rodney's mother, and she loved him.

“ I remain, very sincerely yours,

“ LUCY SELWYN.

“ P.S.—Will you kindly communicate with the lawyers, or shall I ?”

“ It is madness—sheer madness, and must not be permitted,” Phil said to himself, and there and then he took his hat and set off for —, Grafton Street, to prove to Miss Selwyn that it was “ sheer madness,” and to talk her out of it.

Lucy, however, was not to be so easily talked out of her scheme. She was very

sweet, very gentle that morning, but showed a firmer front than he had thought it was in her to show.

He reasoned with her briskly and he reasoned with her slowly; he reasoned with her on the unreasonableness of Mrs. Thorne's offer, and he reasoned with her on its injustice and impropriety.

All in vain. Lucy listened to every word he had to say, did not once interrupt him, nor show the faintest sign of impatience, and then very quietly expressed her intention of adhering to her resolution. Rodney's mother should have Rodney's things intact; so far as she was concerned there should not be one word of contention on the matter.

And then Phil gave up reasoning—she was evidently one of those sweet, good women who were born utterly destitute of the logical faculty—and walked up and down the room haranguing and addressing

her with a vehemence that was new to and rare with him.

Just as much in vain. The haranguing and addressing fell as flat as the reasoning. Lucy waited till he had finished, and then said simply and quietly, without even rising from her chair :

“ Will you write to the lawyers, or will you call on Mrs. Thorne for me ? I would rather you called on her if you didn’t mind ; it would be pleasanter to me if the lawyers had nothing whatever to do with the matter.”

And then Phil stood still in front of her and asked another question in reply :

“ Does Miss Yorke know of your intention, and what does she say to it ?”

It was only by making a huge effort—bringing himself to the point, as it were, that he could mention Ellinor’s name at all. Why this was so he could not explain even to himself, for all the time he had

been arguing and reasoning, haranguing and addressing, he had kept his eye upon the door, and had been wondering in his own mind, "Will she come in this morning? Shall I see her? How will she meet me?"

Lucy shook her head in reply.

"I have not spoken to her on the matter. I did not like to worry her with my affairs—she has troubles enough of her own."

"Troubles of her own!" echoed Phil, who had somehow always taken it for granted, that when Ellinor Yorke was born Fortune was merry, and in a mood to give anything except troubles. "Has anything happened—is her sister worse, or her mother taken ill?"

"Oh no, no, I was not thinking of troubles of that sort—downright heavy sorrows. I meant she was worried, sad, just as kind, noble-hearted people often are

, when they are not understood by those about them."

She was looking steadily at Phil as she said this. Evidently she was speaking with a purpose.

Phil caught her meaning and felt a little guilty, a little bewildered. It was strange to his ears, this advocacy—warm, generous, sincere—from Lucy's lips. Would she—could she have spoken thus had she known all?

He was yet standing in front of Lucy ; he would rather have held his tongue, but could see that she expected him to speak.

Well, it should be in generalities then.

"I suppose we are every one of us more or less of an enigma to those about us," he began.

"Oh no, no," interrupted Lucy ; "don't say every one of us. Only one here and there, and that one possibly nobler and better than the rest of the world. Ah, if

I could but make you understand what a grand, true, good woman Ellinor Yorke is! And that without any fussiness of goodness about her."

"Grand, true, good!" Was it possible those were the right adjectives wherewith to qualify the womanhood of Ellinor Yorke? Great Heavens! if this were so, how he had wronged her by thought and word! But yet—

Lucy interrupted his thoughts again. She was far more ready to speak than he was.

"But I ought not perhaps to have spoken in this way; I can see I distress you. I know Ellinor would be oh, so angry if she could hear me. But I owe her so much, I love her so, I would lay down my life for her!"

"Would lay down her life for her!" thought Phil. Heavens and earth! and if it had not been for this woman Lucy

might at that very moment have been in Rodney's arms and held to his heart.

His silence became oppressive.

"Do—do forgive me," pleaded Lucy, "but I love her so."

Phil spoke with a great effort at last.

"Any one you love must be worth loving, Miss Selwyn," and he meant his words as he said them. Then he paused, and with a still greater effort added: "Will you mind the trouble of charging yourself with a message from me to Miss Yorke? I owe her an apology for some—something that passed between us the other day. Will you kindly tell her I own myself to have been utterly in the wrong, and I beg her pardon most sincerely?"

Lucy's face brightened, and her heart seemed to give one great glad bound. Somehow, when she said good-bye to Phil about five minutes afterwards, she could not help feeling that she had done a very

good morning's work indeed. She had given up property to about the amount of ten or fifteen thousand pounds without the chance of a sixpence in return ; and, better still, she had possibly sown the seeds of a lasting amity (if nothing more) between her two dearly - loved benefactors.

CHAPTER XXVI.

FANCY Order and Punctuality married, and setting up an establishment! Imagine their furnishing on “first principles,” engaging servants, and inaugurating routine without so much as a suggestion from an artist or a woman!

The result might have been Wickham Place, under the rule of Colonel Wickham. From top to bottom of the house everything went as though by clock-work of unfailing regularity. The Colonel had drilled every one of his servants, as in his old soldiering days he had drilled his men; he interviewed his housekeeper daily much

as in the old times he had interviewed his commissary-general, and supplied the wants of his household on the exact method whereby he had been wont to provision his garrison.

Perhaps, to an eye accustomed to pierce below the surface of things, there might have been something of pathos in the unbroken method and order which prevailed throughout the house. The thought might have suggested itself that the wide, dark-panelled hall, with its highly-polished floor and chairs of two centuries old, would look none the worse for an occasional straw hat and gardening-gloves — such as one saw so often as one entered Fairfax Hall — or that the green and gold swathed-up drawing-room might be somewhat the better if some half-score young feet went scampering daily over the velvet-pile carpet, letting out the smell of unuse, and breaking the rigidity of the line of wall-supporters in the shape of chairs and couches.

It is true the library and billiard-room presented a more occupied, informal appearance ; also when Phil was at home a general atmosphere of cheeriness and geniality prevailed ; also Miss Edie, in her frequent morning visits with her father, never failed to bring in with her a rush of youth, and freshness, and merriment. But, as a rule, the aspect of Wickham Place was much that of its master and ruler—an aspect of even, self-contained melancholy.

Possibly never had this aspect of house and master been more marked than in those frosty November days when Phil in London, full of zeal for Lucy Selwyn's interests, was fighting a prolonged battle on her behalf with Mrs. Thorne. See the Colonel as he sits alone in his den, reams of ruled paper in front of him, his brows knotting and eyes narrowing over tiny columns of figures, ranging from hundreds of thousands, downwards. Although still some five or

six years on the right side of sixty (in spite of Miss Edie's computation), he looks worn and tired as a man might verging on the seventies. He is erect, it is true, straight as a young larch, but there is that in his eye, in the curvings of his mouth, which seems to say, "Now that I am alone—no young people buzzing about, no neighbourly hospitalities to give or take—I can be old as I like, sad as I like, weary as I like."

Colonel Wickham's den was a model of what a mathematician's den ought to be, but so rarely is ("blue-book parlour," Phil had christened it in his schoolboy days, and the name still stuck to it). Everything in it, books, papers, indexes, and tables, had been arranged upon geometrical principles under the Colonel's immediate supervision. The floor and walls had been measured to the quarter of an inch, and a perfect plan of both submitted to him before he had had placed a single table or chair. These,

by dint of “playing noughts and crosses all over the slate” (thus Master Phil had characterised his uncle’s geometric calculations), he had finally arranged to his entire satisfaction, and the total result was as hard, formal, and unsnug a snugger as soul of geometrician could desire.

There is a door leading off this room which no stranger’s eye, which not even Phil’s friendly one, no, nor that of any servant in the house, has ever seen the other side of. Every one takes it for granted it is a manuscript-room, nothing more, in which the Colonel has stowed away some of his peculiar treasures in the shape of extracts from insurance magazines, or digests of returns, and no questions are ever asked about it. Could they, however, have turned the handle and looked in, the picture that fronted them might have caused a start of surprise, not for what was there, but for what was not.

It was a narrow, one-windowed little room, scarcely more than a big cupboard, in fact. A small square of Turkey carpet covered the floor; the window was curtainless; the sole furniture was one small table; the walls were bare, save for a water-colour drawing which hung facing the light, and which a connoisseur of works of art would have held utterly unworthy of so honourable a position. It was, truth to tell, exactly the feeble wish-washy sort of thing a school-girl of sixteen might accomplish to take home to admiring mammas and papas. It was the sketch of an old country house, with a fine show of Queen Anne windows, in very queer perspective, with some few dejected-looking topped elms in the background, every one of which was out of drawing. In the foreground, somewhere among some ultramarine grass, nestled the initials "E. M." Immediately under this drawing stands the small table before men-

tioned, on which are placed but two articles —a pot of mignonette in full bloom, and a photograph album of the style and fashion which prevailed some twenty years ago. The Colonel does not often open that album ; he knows “by heart” every line of every feature of that sweet girlish face which would confront him on the first page. A face which, alas ! now some sixteen years ago, was hidden away under the long grass and “moon-daisies” of quiet Stanham churchyard. People don’t know that the Colonel carries the key of this little room about with him wherever he goes, in the breast-pocket of his coat ; nor that every night, the last thing before he goes up to his room, he wanders in here, opens wide the window—which commands, across the park, a view of Stanham churchyard, running up the side of the hill—and says his good-night to that grave among the long grasses.

Even now, as he sits at work in his den, his reams of paper before him, his digests and returns by his side, although the door of the little room is closed and locked, mechanically—or as though magnetically drawn to it—his eyes lift and fasten themselves upon it, while the driest of dry calculations fill his brain, and his thin, white fingers don't know how to work fast enough on his long columns of minute figures.

Colonel Wickham has taken up with a new branch of his beloved art since Phil has gone to London, and has gone over head and ears into it. It is vital statistics now, and nothing but returns of births, marriages, and deaths, for the past fifteen years, in the United Kingdom, seems to possess any real or permanent interest for him. He has shut himself up a good deal lately to work at his figures, and, truth to tell, has not seen one quarter of what has

been going on under his very eyelids. He has only half—nay, quarter—read Phil's short, hastily-written letters, running his eye over the page of note-paper and altogether failing to read between the wide-apart lines. So, as a natural consequence, he utterly fails to catch the under-note of disquiet which runs through them, of dissatisfaction and some sort of struggle going on in the writer's mind. Nor does it strike him as anything out of the way when Phil declines the invitation to Lord Winterdowne's ball and intimates his intention of not being home for Christmas, as he is going to spend the holidays "with Kenrick's people, in the North."

Also the Colonel has been so seldom to the Hall lately, he has not noticed a fact which just now has been to the gossips of Stanham as good as sugar to their tea and butter to their toast —namely, that Lord

Winterdowne spends a great deal of his time there; that, on the days he is not to be found in Miss Fairfax's drawing-room, he has, as a rule, joined her and her father in their morning rides or walks.

By-and-by the Colonel will wake up with a great start, clear his eyesight of units and tens, and discover that things are not going on just as they ought to go.

But that will not be till Christmas has come and gone, and the ball at Winterdowne Castle is a thing of the past.

CHAPTER XXVII.

EDIE received the intimation from her father that Phil had declined the invitation to the Winterdowne ball. She gave the merriest of merry laughs, and clapped her hands so smartly that she cracked her riding-gloves.

“Why, how delicious!” she cried. “What a ball it will be! I can have as many partners as I like, and as many valses as I like! It will be the very first real ball I shall ever have had. At all my other balls I have always been ‘an engaged young lady,’ you know. Now, at this ball I sha’n’t be the least bit in the world

‘engaged,’ and shall do just whatever I like.”

“Then, my dear,” said the Squire, “I think the sooner you get ‘engaged’ again the better it will be for you and everybody about you. I don’t——”

But Edie did not wait to hear the end of the sentence. She had flown up to her own room, and there was she vigorously bathing her eyes with sponge and cold water to keep the tears out of them.

“For why should I get red rims to my eyes,” she said to herself courageously, defiantly, “and set everybody pitying me? Depend upon it, Phil won’t get any to his to keep me in countenance.”

But, could she have seen Phil’s eyes at that precise moment, truth would have compelled her to confess that, though they had no “red rims” to them, they had an equivalent in the shape of a heavy, weary, downcast lid, which told of sleepless nights

and a mind ill at ease. Possibly, could little Edie have caught a glimpse of him for a brief five minutes just then, she would have put her pride into her pocket, and would have twined her arms round his neck, and whispered in his ear some such loving phrase as :

“ Dear Phil, let’s give over all this nonsense, and go back to the old happy time once more.”

However, she did not catch such a glimpse of him, so the words, of necessity, were not spoken. The foolish, proud little maiden threw herself heart and soul into preparations for this that she was pleased to style her “ first real ball,” saying to herself one day, “ It’s only for a time ; things will soon be all right between us ;” and the next, “ It will go on for ever and ever. I’m positive Phil and I, in this world, will never meet again ! ”

So Phil went on his course unmolested—

a course that in its day's portion included a good many kindly thoughts for Lucy Selwyn, and a good deal of vigorous championship of her and her rights. He had acceded to Lucy's request, and had called upon Mrs. Thorne, with Lucy's magnanimous offer in his hand.

"Does it not take your breath away, Mrs. Thorne?" he had cried enthusiastically, as the lady, in stately silence, fronted him while he made the free-will offering on Lucy's behalf.

Then Mrs. Thorne opened her lips, putting on one side his enthusiastic encomiums with a slight wave of her hand.

"I must take time to consider my reply. I will send it through you, if you will allow me, Mr. Wickham," she said, in a tone that suggested mid-winter and skating.

To say truth, this was about the sorest blow to her pride Mrs. Thorne had ever in

her whole life received. To a woman of her temperament, the plucking out of her own right eye, or the cutting off her own right hand, so that she might enter her Kingdom of Heaven, would have been a comparatively easy task. But that another person—and that person one whom she despised and hated—should mutilate herself, as it were, and say, “Now, Mrs. Thorne, here’s your Kingdom of Heaven; you may enter it scot-free,” was a thing not to be borne. She would far sooner, had such a thing been allowed, have contested Rodney’s will in every law-court in the kingdom than thus have had the desire of her heart given to her, “without money and without price,” from such a hand.

Of course Phil was in a manner compelled to convey Mrs. Thorne’s ungracious response to Lucy. She received it with a start of surprise and a slightly flushing face.

Ellinor was in the room on this occasion. It was the first time she had seen Phil since he had sent her so humble an apology, and she took care to be present, receiving him gravely and graciously, to make him understand—a thing he was not slow to do—that his apology was accepted.

She tossed her head slightly as she heard of Mrs. Thorne's ungracious hesitation.

"I would like to have dealings with a woman like that," she said. "I would make her pay a price for the things she wanted, though it should not be in silver or gold. Lucy, you are too good to have dealings with persons of that order of mind."

"She is Rodney's mother," answered Lucy gravely and simply, showing by her manner that she would not have Mrs. Thorne discussed in her presence, no matter what might be her "order of mind." "By-

and-by; I feel sure, when she has taken time to think over the matter, she will send me a kinder message."

But although Mrs. Thorne took time—nearly a week—to think over the matter; a kinder message was not forthcoming. There came instead a brief and somewhat formal note to Phil, saying that Mrs. Thorne felt sure the offer that had been made to her by Miss Selwyn had been made without due consideration on the latter's part, and would on maturer reflection be withdrawn, and a money value be set upon the property according to Mrs. Thorne's previous request. The lady concluded her letter by saying she would be greatly obliged to Mr. Wickham if he would use his personal influence in the matter, and make it plain to Miss Selwyn how unfit it was that such an offer should have been made to Mrs. Thorne by a person in Miss Selwyn's position.

Phil's spirit rose against this letter.

"I will do no such dirty work," he said to himself angrily. "Why can't she write her own messages, or for the matter of that take them? She might do a worse thing than call upon Lucy Selwyn."

Then he went at once to Mrs. Thorne with her letter in his hand, saying to her, in effect, the words he had said to himself some ten minutes previously, softening them only so far as was necessary to meet the exigencies of the lady's drawing-room.

Mrs. Thorne's eyes glittered for a moment.

"Am I to infer, then," she said slowly and coldly, "that you decline to take a message from me to this young person?"

Those three words, "this young person," set Phil in a flame again.

"I most positively decline to take this young lady"—laying marked emphasis on these three words—"the message contained in your letter of this morning," he

said, and there was no mistaking that he meant his words as he spoke them.

“Then there is nothing more to be said on the matter,” said Mrs. Thorne, giving him a formal bow of dismissal, and ringing the bell for the servant as she spoke.

“One moment, Mrs. Thorne,” cried Phil impetuously. “Don’t think I won’t help you in this affair; it is that I can’t in the way you wish. Let me make a suggestion! Why not see Miss Selwyn yourself, talk the thing over with her? I am quite certain it would be the best and the right way of arranging it all.”

But Mrs. Thorne only bowed even more formally than before.

“I am not open to suggestions on this matter,” she said briefly and coldly, looking at the door as she spoke.

So Phil had no choice but to take his leave, and equally no choice, so it seemed to him, but to go straight from Eaton

Square to Grafton Street, to communicate to Miss Selwyn the ill result of his interview.

As usual the two girls received him in their pleasant little morning-room, which had now been the scene of not a few pleasant little meetings between the three.

It may be noted that at not one of these pleasant little meetings had Sir Peter or Lady Moulsey ever made a fourth.

“Gout holds one victim upstairs, rheumatism another,” said Ellinor, as she shook hands with Phil that morning. “Let us be thankful for small mercies!”

It must be admitted that with all this woman’s faults—and their name was legion—none could accuse her of ever simulating a kindness of heart she did not feel. No! She knew well enough how to dazzle and befool men without any aid from those small hypocrisies in which so many women run riot.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

“A LITTLE country girl who is playing fast and loose with him.” The words kept repeating themselves with a painful iteration in Lucy’s mind, more especially on those days when Phil had dawdled away the best half of the morning in the society of Ellinor and herself.

She conjured up a picture of the said “little country girl,” which, it may be conjectured, neither Edie’s best friend nor her worst enemy would have recognised. She must be, so Lucy decided, before anything else, a heartless, unblushing coquette—one who tried to win men’s hearts without

having quite made up her mind whether or not she wished to keep them when won.

“Playing fast and loose” must mean that if it meant anything. Of course she must have beauty of a certain sort, or opportunity for “playing fast and loose” would not be vouchsafed to her; but it could only be “of a certain sort,” for the words “little country girl” did not seem to imply beauty of a refined type; also they suggested the idea—at least to Lucy’s mind—that this beauty “of a certain sort” was the young lady’s chief and one qualification for playing her game of fast and loose. Her intellectual attainments were possibly nil, her moral nature, no doubt, of an equally low order.

Thus Edie Fairfax stood personified to Lucy’s imagination.

And a tiresome, haunting personification it was too. Do what she would, go where she would, Lucy somehow could not shake

herself free from it. Did she and Ellinor go for a walk, a drive, or sit in cosy silence over a crackling fire, this "little country girl" seemed to force herself upon them, an unwelcome, uninvited third. Did Phil come in for half-an-hour's chat—as he did so often during those foggy, frosty mornings which set in before Christmas—the "little country girl" somehow seemed to make her presence felt in the room, and Lucy, as she sat quiet and all but unnoticed in a corner, would find herself wondering over her ways, her looks, her doings, in a manner that was quite unaccountable to herself.

For instance, when Phil's eyes wandered, as they so often did now, to Ellinor's face, wonderingly, inquiringly, yet always admiringly, she found herself saying: "I wonder if he looks in that way at 'the little country girl'?" When Phil would suddenly and unaccountably change his seat—to Lucy's fancy it seemed for the

whole and sole purpose of getting a view of the beautiful Ellinor from another angle — she would say to herself: “I wonder if ‘the little country girl’ could stand being looked at from so many points of view!” And last of all, as it so often happened when Ellinor would rise from her chair and say she had an engagement somewhere or other, and must go, and Phil would rise also to take his leave, and their eyes would be on a level one with the other, she would find herself saying not only, “What a splendid pair of lovers those two would make!” but “I dare say ‘the little country girl’ is only just up to his chin, if she gets so far as that;” and so on, and so on.

It was tiresome, this haunting personality of a perfect stranger. Even when Phil went away for the Christmas holidays up to the north, and might have been supposed to carry his “atmosphere” with him, Edie

seemed somehow left behind; and when Ellinor became, as she did just then, suddenly quiet, thoughtful, a little *triste* perhaps, and assuredly by a good deal less haughty and satirical than her wont, Lucy said to herself: "She is thinking, as I am, of 'the little country girl,' and wondering how she can find it in her heart to play fast and loose with one so good and true as Mr. Wickham."

Thought so perpetually setting in one direction must with practical, matter-of-fact people lead to some definite result. Lucy was practical and matter-of-fact to a degree, and her thinking had a very definite and practical ending, as Edie Fairfax was in due course to discover.

Meantime, the subject of so many speculations, little, tempestuous Edie herself, was having but a sorry time of it down at Stanham, in spite of the Christmas festivities which the Castle ball had inaugurated.

In the first place the Castle ball itself (given a day or two after Christmas) was a failure ; look at it which way she would, Edie was bound to confess it was a failure. Although she had absolutely kissed herself in her own mirror with delight at the success of the toilette she had planned, although she had gone out of the house saying in a most resolute voice : “ Papa, I know I shall enjoy myself to-night more than I ever have in my whole life ! ” yet, long before the ball had reached its height, she was sitting, white and weary, talking platitudes with the oldest of the dowagers present ; and just when everything was at its gayest and best, the band playing the most delicious of valses, and the muscles of every young foot in the room settling themselves into three-four time, Edie had crept up to her father in the card-room, and was whispering in his ear, “ Papa, I am worn out—tired to death.

You must order the carriage at once, or I shall die on the floor." And all through the dark, cold drive home she had leaned back on the cushions, saying never a word.

Colonel Wickham, calling at the Hall on the day after the ball, was struck by the little, white, forlorn-looking face. After a month of good hard working at his vital statistics, the Colonel had awakened suddenly to the fact that they were too much for him, they somehow touched what he had been fain to hope was a vacant place in his organism, but was now compelled to admit held a heart. The returns of the deaths of the young sempstresses and mantle-makers in the metropolis possibly struck the first chord, the death-rate (and its causes) of the infant population struck the second, a yet fuller and louder note.

The Colonel swept all his books and MSS. into a cupboard, and turned the key on them.

“Heavens and earth!” he said to himself, “if I work at those figures much longer I shall lose my head over them, or else turn every acre I possess into hard cash, and found a huge *crèche* somewhere for the ill-used little ones.”

And then, to somewhat brace his nerves from the strain he had put on them, he had taken his hat and gone over to the Hall, thinking he would get little Edie to “talk the blues” out of him.

They were just sitting down to luncheon as the Colonel entered, Edie, her father, and one guest—Lord Winterdowne. Colonel Wickham had the heartiest of welcomes. It seemed to him that Lord Winterdowne was on very easy, intimate terms at the Hall, also that his gold eye-glasses were very constantly turned in Edie’s direction.

“Perhaps he bores her, poor little maid! and that’s why she looks so white and tired,”

the Colonel thought, and then he fell to wondering over the "little maid's" obstinacy and silliness in setting on foot an order of things which left her open to any amount of disagreeable attention from this or any other almost stranger.

"It's a thousand pities Phil took her at her word; he might have been sure she didn't know what she was doing, and didn't mean a quarter of what she said," his thoughts went on; "it's only when women deliberate over things and thoroughly know their own hearts——"

"Why, Wickham, you look as blue as the books you're always studying," said the Squire's loud, cheery voice, striking athwart the current of his thoughts.

Lord Winterdowne turned to him politely.

"I have always thought the study of Blue-books must be a most—a—interesting study—one I should like to have taken up

with, had I been able to concentrate my time and thought — a — to one pursuit. Where would any science be in the present day without Blue-books to substantiate—a — or otherwise the theories it—a—from time to time puts forth? Theories are nothing unless built upon facts—a—facts are worthless until we reduce them to — a — their elements—a—and—a—index these elements, catalogue them—a—for future use.”

It was said with the air of a man inaugurating a science congress, and in a tone of voice that would have done credit to the President of the Royal Society himself.

“Good heavens, what a dose!” thought the Squire. Aloud he said cheerily: “I believe you two gentlemen would enjoy seeing your best friends reduced to their ‘elements,’ as you call it, so that you might ‘catalogue them for future use’—eh, Edie?”

“I think dust and ashes are very good

things to be reduced to," answered Edie with an energy that made them all start. Then, as she finished speaking, she rose from the luncheon-table and left the room by a door leading into the conservatory.

Lord Winterdowne rose also and followed her.

Colonel Wickham looked after them uneasily.

"Now, surely," he began, turning to the Squire, "that man isn't going to make a fool of himself over our little Edie!"

"Looks rather like it — doesn't it?" answered the Squire serenely; "but whether Edie will feel inclined to make a fool of herself by way of acknowledging the compliment is another thing. I rather think not."

The Colonel did not feel so sure on the matter. More especially when, half-an-hour afterwards, he heard Edie in the drawing-room, at her piano, singing, evi-

dently for Lord Winterdowne's delectation, one after the other, exactly the songs she was wont to carol to Phil.

One—a quaint little French ditty with the refrain, “A toi, à toi je chante toujours”—made the Colonel jump clean out of his chair, and declare that he must make haste home at once, he had a letter of importance to write ; he had forgotten he had the post to save that afternoon.

The song pursued him out of the house and half-way down the avenue. He could picture little Edie's sweet mouth as she sang the “A toi, à toi,” and—yes—well—he knew what her eyes could say to the man she chose to sing it to.

Colonel Wickham did save the post that afternoon. His letter of importance was addressed to his nephew Phil, at that time spending his Christmas up in the north with the Kenricks. It told him, in a few short, strong sentences, how that a man, who

had lately come upon the scenes at Stanham, had taken it into his head to poach upon his (Phil's) preserves, and if he did not make up his mind to come back home at once, he might rue it to the end of his life:

CHAPTER XXIX.

PHIL, however, did not get his letter till it was nearly a week old, and for these reasons: The house-party at the Kenricks' was a dull one, consisting chiefly of paters and maters familias, and middle-aged maiden aunts. Christmas Day over, the young men grew bored.

“Let’s go and snipe-shoot at Dartmoor. I’ve an invitation to a jolly house there, and can take a good ‘gun’ with me,” whispered Arthur Kenrick in Phil’s ear.

So the young men took their guns and set off for Dartmoor, thankfully shaking their heels free from the decorous dust of Kenrick Manor.

At Dartmoor the house chanced to be as cheery as Kenrick Manor was grim. Bright eyes looked pleasant welcomes to the young men as they came in be-legginged, mud-spattered, with a fresh gorsy smell hanging about them from their long tramp over moor and fen, after the beautiful, difficult, zig-zagging birds. Arthur Kenrick fell victim at once to a sweet blue-eyed maiden of seventeen, an Australian heiress, who wore the loveliest of maize tea-gowns, and had hair about a yard long, even when plaited in five. Phil watched the rapid, headlong lovemaking that went on under his very eyelids with an odd sensation somewhere about the left side of his waistcoat. Escaped from the spell which a certain pair of large, lustrous brown eyes had appeared to cast upon him, the memory of the old, happy, lazy, lovemaking days at Stanham, and of little Edie, in all her sweet, lovable whimsicalness, rushed back upon him in full force.

On the third day of his stay at Dartmoor, he woke with the resolution strong upon him of running off to Stanham for a week or so, getting as many glimpses of Edie in the time as possible, and—well, if she should ask him to prolong his stay, or show the least symptom of an inclination to let things slide back to their old happy footing, he would not be the one to say “No.”

But, alas for these brave resolutions! Like the morning clouds, they had all vanished, before breakfast came to an end, with the turn of the key in the lock of the family letter-bag. The post that morning, with a tailor’s bill and a boot bill, and a reminder from his club that his yearly subscription was due, brought Phil a small missive, written in a hand that he had learnt to recognise as Ellinor Yorke’s, but which, in reality, was that of the faithful Gretchen. It informed him, in the briefest and most conventional of sentences, that

Miss Yorke would be very glad to see him immediately on his return to London, to consult him on a certain matter connected with Miss Selwyn's affairs, which had occasioned her some little perplexity.

Now which was it to be—Stanham or London?

“Stanham,” said common-sense, reason, and every right feeling left in Phil’s honest heart.

“London,” said every one of his five senses which Ellinor had befooled, bedazzled, and bewildered to her heart’s content. To London he went, steaming into Waterloo about six o’clock that same evening, and saying to himself as he drove off once more to his old hotel, how easy it would be to run down to Stanham in a day or two when he had seen Miss Yorke, and talked over with her Lucy Selwyn’s perplexing affairs.

What the exact cause of perplexity was,

truth to tell, did not trouble him greatly. For the nonce lighter questions held his brain, and importuned for an answer. Such as, how would Miss Yorke receive him—warmly, coldly, indifferently? With what looks would she greet him? What would be the first words her lips would speak to him?

Not till some twelve or fourteen hours afterwards did he receive answers to these questions, and when they came they were certainly not of the kind he expected. As, for instance, could the half-turn of a reclining head, the suspicion of a smile, and the coldly explanatory phrase, "I dare not move, I am posing for Mr. Effingham; he is arranging his colours in the next room," be deemed satisfactory by a young man of six-and-twenty, who considered that he had something of a right to an extra warm greeting, a kindly pressure of a soft hand, a long, lingering look,

not careless glance, from a pair of beautiful eyes?

“Is Miss Selwyn in?” asked Phil coldly, disappointedly, trying to meet indifference with indifference.

Ellinor looked towards the door, at that moment opening to admit Miss Selwyn.

Phil had been received this time in the drawing-room. It had the swathed-up generic look furnished-house drawing-rooms wear. It was a big, lofty room, divided from a smaller by a pair of thick dark curtains. As Lucy entered by the door these curtains were pushed on one side, and Mr. Effingham came in, palette in hand.

He was a small, dark man, of the lazy, effeminate Italian type. There was nothing particularly noticeable about him save his eyes, which were large, dark, and lustrous, and had expression enough in them for all the Paolos and Francesca da Riminis that

ever were painted. He was a slow and reluctant speaker, but these eyes of his did duty for his tongue—when, where, and as he willed. As, for instance, when they rested for a brief moment on Phil, making a slight formal bow in acknowledgment of Ellinor's introduction, they said as plainly as lips could, "Philistine of Philistines, stand off from the holy of holies." And when they wandered from Phil's fair face to Lucy's brown one, their language was, "Good little soul! you play gooseberry as sweetly as such a sour part can be played."

Phil read and mentally resented both looks.

"No doubt we shall come to a reckoning by-and-by," his eyes would have said had they been as skilled in optical telegraphy as Mr. Effingham's.

"Come into this little room, please, Mr. Wickham," said Lucy, leading the way

through the curtains. "How good of you to come! Oh, I have been so troubled and perplexed, but have made up my mind at last."

Then she laid the cause of her trouble and perplexity before Phil, in the shape of another letter from Mrs. Thorne's lawyers.

It was a plain business communication, informing Miss Selwyn that, as she had declined to affix any money value to the property bequeathed to her by the late Mr. Rodney Thorne, Mrs. Thorne had had a careful estimate made of it by qualified persons, who had valued it, as it stood, at a little under ten thousand pounds, inclusive of pictures and jewellery. This sum Mrs. Thorne had had paid to Miss Selwyn's credit at the bankers, through whom she would receive the dividends on the one thousand pounds bequeathed by Rodney to her. When duly advised by the bankers that this ten thousand pounds was in their hands, they (the lawyers)

would feel obliged if Miss Selwyn would sign and return to them the enclosed formal receipt, and Mrs. Thorne would consider the matter concluded.

Phil's indignation at the cool, business-like tone of the whole arrangement, at the distance placed and kept between Mrs. Thorne and the girl who ought to have been her son's wife, would no doubt have risen more rapidly and to a greater height had not his ears been caught, now and again, as he read the lawyer's letter, by the half-sentences that were going on the other side of the curtains between Ellinor and the artist.

"I fail to see," Ellinor was saying in slow, low tones, "why you cannot paint me except in a slumberous or semi-slumberous condition. I must be either going to sleep or awakening from it, it seems, to give you satisfaction.

"Repose without solidity, immobility

without marmoreal hardness, can only be expressed by beauty of the highest, purest type," was the artist's reply in equally slow, but somewhat deeper tones.

"The arrant young coxcomb!" thought Phil. "I should like to——" Then he caught Lucy's eyes fixed on him, and felt she was waiting for him to speak. "Ah yes, it's simply abominable—that's all I can say, Miss Selwyn. Of course, you'll just send back the receipt unsigned, and tell them Mrs. Thorne may have the things as a free gift, or not at all."

Lucy's reply was to spread the receipt signed before him.

"It cost me something to accept it," she said apologetically; "but after thinking for hours and hours over it, it seemed to me the only thing I could do to end the contention——"

Phil's astonishment was halved by his anxiety to catch Ellinor's next sentence.

"It is easier to find a Gyneth than a De Vaux," she was saying, and the words seemed to end in something of a sigh.

So, then, she was posing as a Gyneth. Would that small, large-eyed idiot staring at her in there be fool enough to imagine he could figure as a De Vaux? Phil waited impatiently for the artist's reply. It did not come for full a minute and a half, and then it was:

"He'll be a happy man, whoever he may be, when he is found."

Phil could fancy the look that went with the words.

Lucy was obliged to claim his attention.

"I hope you think I have done right, Mr. Wickham," she said anxiously; "it has all troubled me very much. Mrs. Thorne was so resolute, the contention was so unseemly."

Phil, with an effort, placed both his ears at Lucy's service.

“You could have been equally resolute if you had chosen,” he said. “I don’t suppose I’m a particularly good hand at giving advice, but if you had asked me I should certainly have advised a different course. I would at least have been treated with common politeness, after the magnanimous manner in which you have acted.”

Lucy sighed.

“So Ellinor said; but of course she might do what I could not. I am thankful to end the matter, the contention was so unseemly.”

And that was all she seemed capable of saying or thinking. “The contention was so unseemly—and with Rodney’s mother.”

“You should have had dealings with Rodney’s mother direct, not through lawyers,” Phil said hotly. “But, however, nothing I can say will be of much use now, I suppose.”

Then he rose in a great hurry to take

his leave. For one thing his conscience was pricking him sharply in that when he had had the opportunity of setting Lucy's conduct in a right light before Mrs. Thorne, he had not done so, though it might have been at the expense of Ellinor Yorke and Rodney himself. For another, he felt that existence was impossible within twenty feet of that supercilious young artist—even though tapestry curtains might divide them—unless permission to break the peace were granted to him.

As he passed through the other drawing-room Ellinor did not rouse herself from her dreamy, delicious attitude of rounded repose. She, however, gave him a dozen or so of words.

“I want you to do something for me if you will, Mr. Wickham,” she said sweetly. “I want you to get me the address of the cleverest lung doctor in London, and bring it to me to-morrow—will you ? ”

Phil looked his amazement.

“I hope his services are not needed here,” he said, and quite involuntarily his glance shifted to Lucy Selwyn.

Ellinor’s smile reassured him.

“It is to please Uncle Hugh,” she said; “old men are always fussy—because I have had a three days’ influenza I must needs have my lungs sounded and be dosed with cod-liver oil !”

Phil went straight from Grafton Street to the Consumption Hospital to get a list of all the clever lung doctors in London.

And all this time there was lying waiting for him at the cheery house at Dartmoor, Colonel Wickham’s earnest, warning, beseeching letter, which Arthur Kenrick, all-absorbed in the owner of the lovely blue eyes and exquisite maize tea-gowns, forgot to have forwarded.

CHAPTER XXX.

THERE could be no doubt about it; while Phil was away, enjoying his Christmas holidays, Ellinor had been in a perennial state of bad-temper, though Lucy, who could not see a fault in those she loved, would not admit the fact even to herself, and pleaded all sorts of plausible excuses for her benefactress; such as the dreariness of the house in Grafton Street, the fussiness of the ancient Sir Peter and his wrinkled wife, the prevalence of the east wind, the sharp attack of influenza Ellinor had had to endure—to any and every cause, in fact, except the right ones, of

which she was as ignorant as though she lived in another planet, and could only catch sight of Ellinor's orb, when the moon was at its full, through a powerful telescope.

The causes of Ellinor's bad-temper are easily told. They were two-fold. Cause number one was a visit from Uncle Hugh, in which he fussed and fumed a great deal, asked her if she had yet consulted a London doctor, expressed his willingness to escort her to a man in whom he had the very greatest confidence, arched his brows at her when she flatly refused to be so escorted, as there was another "lung-man" she infinitely preferred to the one he had named, and whose address had been given her, but, unfortunately, had been mislaid.

"Uncle Hugh" was more "put out" with his beautiful niece at this interview than he had ever been before. He went

away that morning, saying it was high time she joined her mother at Mentone, and he did not leave his customary cheque behind him.

Ellinor condensed a report of this interview for Lucy's benefit into a single paragraph, thus :

“Poor old Uncle Hugh is afraid I shall get a chronic red nose if this cold hangs about me so long. He actually wants me to see a doctor. I suppose I shall have to humour him.”

She did not think it necessary to mention the fact that the consultation of a physician had been the whole and sole pretext for her visit to London at this unseasonable time of year.

Cause number two was an irritating item of news, which came to her in round-about fashion from Stanham. Since Ellinor's visit to the Fairfaxes, her maid Mélanie had kept up an intermittent correspondence with the

housekeeper at the Hall. From that worthy had come tidings of Lord Winterdowne's flattering attentions to Miss Edie, coupled with the assurance that there could be little doubt but what the young lady might become Lady Winterdowne, of Winterdowne Castle, if she chose to throw over Mr. Wickham, as people at Stanham were inclined to think she would.

This news was in due course communicated to Ellinor during one of her elaborate toilettes.

“Taisez-vous, vous babillez comme une fille de village,” was all the acknowledgment poor little Mélanie had for bringing to her mistress what she imagined could not fail to be an interesting item of gossip. She did not know—nor did any one else in the house—that, for twenty-four hours after, little Edie in the Winterdowne diamonds was the one vision that filled Ellinor's thoughts. Poor Esau's state of mind when

he railed at his brother and called him a supplanter, was mild compared with Ellinor's during that twenty-four hours.

“These two times—these two times she has supplanted me,” in effect she kept saying to herself all day long; “without an effort this little country girl wins the love of a man who has nothing but indifference or scorn for others far more beautiful and distinguished than she; and then when that love seems slipping away from her, secures for herself the offer of wealth and position far beyond what she is entitled to in common-sense and reason.”

Ellinor's thoughts grew very bitter against Edie just then. She translated them, however, into a phraseology that might have been dictated by the purest Christian charity to Lucy one afternoon, as they sat chatting together over the drawing-room fire.

“I have heard of my little cousin at

Stanham," she said; "she is leading on another man now, just as she has led poor Mr. Wickham for the last two years, in fact ever since she has been out of short frocks."

Then she paused a minute and added in a thoughtful tone, as though the idea had just come to her: "It's a thousand pities she hasn't a mother, or some kind, sober-minded friend, who could tell her the mischief she may bring about with her heedless flirtations."

Then, having set Lucy's brain working in the direction she wished, she set her own going on a series of possibilities, probabilities, and practicabilities, having for their issue the solution of the question: "Why must I marry the man I love—this man, Phil Wickham, whom I have so nearly brought to my feet? Why may I not do as some half-dozen girls I know have done already—marry the man who

can give the diamonds and the dresses, the horses, the town and country houses, and befool, and hoodwink, and blind him and 'society' at large, and keep my heart free all the time for the man not so favoured by fortune and who has little more than passion to offer for passion?"

It was in effect going over once more the ground she had gone over, as she had thought, finally at Stanham; with this difference: then the question to be answered had been, "Which of these two lots in life shall I keep, which let go?" Now it was, "Why may I not keep both for my own—the lot that carries with it wealth and distinction, and the lot that, by comparison, has nothing but love to recommend it?"

It seemed to her now that this question might be answered in the affirmative. At any rate, after hours of protracted thought, thus she answered it. And having thus answered it, there remained naught to

ruminate upon save “the means, the manner, and the end” of her twofold design.

It is plain that Ellinor Yorke compounded with her innate selfishness of disposition an indomitable will—a certain amount even of heroic capability which, had it been turned into another channel, and had her gender been masculine, might have won kingdoms for her, or at least would have placed her, a second Beaconsfield, on a pinnacle as a prince of diplomatists.

She arranged her plan of campaign, her tactics, her whole line of march, step by step, at one sitting.

Step number one was to renew the intimacy she had formed a year ago with Lord Winterdowne at Florence. Here her thoughts naturally flew to Uncle Hugh, who had been on fairly intimate terms with Lord Winterdowne for some years past. Well, in that case, Uncle Hugh must be

kept in a good humour, and made to undertake a certain amount of social hospitalities which would conduce to the desired end.

Step number two of course would be the bringing of Lord Winterdowne to her feet. That would be simple and everyday work enough to her.

Step number three would be most difficult of all to accomplish. It involved the keeping Phil her admiring, devoted slave while she toyed and trifled with Lord Winterdowne and eventually married him.

But, though willing to admit that difficulties enough stood in the way of her wishes, the possibility of reversal and final defeat never once crossed her mind. Why should it? Up to the present she had played any game in life she had chosen, and had invariably won. What was there in this little simple game to make her heart quail?

So far as she could see, little Edie was about the bitterest, the strongest, and the cleverest foe she had to encounter. Yet, take her at the best, she could not magnify her into anything very bitter, very strong, very clever. She was little more than a child in years, her attractions were of the simplest, the freshest, the most unpretending order. Her easy winning of lover after lover was, no doubt, due to a fortunate combination of circumstances; it proved nothing as to her power of keeping them. To think that little Edie Fairfax could keep a lover whom she (Ellinor Yorke) had decided to win would have been, to her way of thinking, quite the other end of absurdity.

“Give her the crown of England at once —why not?” said Ellinor, smiling to herself at the thought; “she to hold, to keep, when I say let go! All her strength is in her smiles and her tears, and even those she

hasn't the wisdom to keep in reserve and use with discretion!"

It can scarcely be wondered at if Ellinor, with such a train of thought set going in her brain, gave her answers in monosyllables, and showed herself generally uncompanionable to those around her.

Lucy, however, aroused her at last, in a measure that surprised herself, by spreading the letter from Mrs. Thorne's lawyers before her and asking a word of advice as to what had best be done.

Ellinor awoke to sudden energy.

"Mr. Wickham ought to know of this. I will write to tell him at once," she said; and there and then she gave orders to Gretchen to pen the neat little note which had prevented Phil's visit to Stanham.

There are some birds which can be caught in a net, others with a handful of corn. There are others, also, who must be winged before they can be brought down.

Phil Wickham belonged to this last order, and assuredly Lucy made the most willing and best trained stalking-horse imaginable, in whose shadow Ellinor could load her gun and take her aim at her leisure.

CHAPTER XXXI.

PHIL brought a whole list of lung doctors for Ellinor to choose from. It took him the greater part of a morning to hunt up these names, and effectually prevented that “run down to Stanham” which he had thought so easy of accomplishment on the previous day during his up journey. Somehow—the exact “how” he could not have explained to himself—this visit to Stanham seemed retiring into the distance, did not seem to stand out in such clear and brilliant colouring as it did some two days ago. He could not see quite so dis-

tinctly “in his mind’s eye” Edie’s bright little flush of welcome, the gleam of delight in her brown eyes, nor hear the sweet vibrating voice whispering tremulously—as once or twice in fancy he had heard it during his stay at Dartmoor: “Oh, Phil dear, this is heavenly! Don’t go away any more.”

Ellinor ran her eye lazily, sleepily over the doctors’ names, then tossed them across the table to old Lady Moulsey, who, by a rare chance, was present when Phil came in.

“What is it, my dear?” asked the old lady in her shrill, weak falsetto. “A charity subscription? Has there been another colliery accident—or is it for the Deceased Wife’s Sister’s Association?”

Ellinor only moved her lips in reply. Then she turned to Phil.

“Old people have so little in life to interest them,” she said by way of explana-

tion. "It may amuse her to wonder over the names for half-an-hour. Lucy will explain all to her when she comes in."

"It is delightful to see young people showing kindly consideration to their elders," said Phil sarcastically.

He never entered this young woman's presence without being in some way ruffled, troubled, grieved for her, and for her womanhood. He never left her presence without having given utterance to sarcasm or bitter speech of some sort. It was so with most men of Ellinor's acquaintance; yet for all that they never forsook her society until chance, circumstance, or the imperative mandate of the beauty herself compelled them to do so.

"Is that meant for a cut at me, or a compliment to Lucy?" asked Ellinor with a laugh. "Really, Mr. Wickham, if I were not bound to be very grateful for the trouble you have taken for me, I

should feel inclined to say you were in a disagreeable frame of mind this morning."

"They are all doctors, my dear; are they on the committee?" broke in Lady Moulsey's shrill treble once more.

Again Ellinor moved her lips, and Lady Moulsey, feeling, as she always did in Ellinor's presence, that her hearing was getting worse and worse every day she lived, laid the list of names on one side, and went back to her newspaper.

Ellinor took up the list.

"What a number of names you have managed to get together! What a multitude of wretched, miserable, croaking, sickly people there must be in the world!" Then after a pause: "It seems so odd for me to be going to a doctor."

"But you are not ill, why do you go?" asked Phil, surveying her superbly rounded form, her brilliant shining eyes, the dainty colouring of lip and cheek.

“ Ill ! ” laughed Ellinor ; “ I have never had a day’s illness in my life ; I am even shaking off my influenza without so much as a cup of gruel. It’s only to set old Uncle Hugh’s mind at rest that I am going to have my pulse felt and the stethoscope applied.”

“ Ah, I see ; more consideration for old age and infirmities,” murmured Phil.

“ Exactly ; how well you read me ! And if you only knew how I hate the very name of doctor, you would appreciate my self-denial to its fullest extent. Doctors never come into a house but what they upset it from top to bottom. When they used to come (in sets of twos or threes) to see Juliet, they always left my mother in tears, and there was always a packing up of boxes, and a setting off to some wretched seaside place the next day.”

Ellinor did not often deal in such long speeches ; she was, however, for some

reason or other unusually animated that morning. The plans laid with such precision a day or two previously would certainly not fail for lack of energy in their execution.

A white frosty sun shining in through the gray dulled window-panes, fell in scattered beams athwart a face that might have been that of the goddess of eternal youth itself for the fresh young life that coloured hair, eyes, cheek, and lip. "I have a score or so of years before me, not a doubt," that young face seemed to say, "wherein to hold court and receive taxes, condemn, punish, pardon, and release at will. Soul, thou hast much goods laid up for many years—eat, drink, be merry."

The same white sunlight went flowing over sofas and chairs, to where, on the other side of the table, an old head in muslin-cap crooned over a *Times* newspaper, and showed up with merciless

exactitude scant gray hairs, blurred eyesight, wrinkles that might be counted by twenties. "I shall soon be tenant of the house the sexton builds," this face might have said; "it can matter but little to me what goes on in this. Soul, drug thyself, and deaden thy senses now in the twilight as fast as possible, so that when the night comes thou wilt not know it."

Yet, perchance, had that old common arbitrator, Time, in person stood there between the old head and the young one, and appraised with his usual brutal frankness the days that remained to each, he might have said there was not a pin to choose between them.

Lucy Selwyn, however, coming in from a morning's walk, would not have echoed old Time's dictum. To her, as she entered the room, the picture of Ellinor in wide, high-backed chair (Ellinor invariably selected large, throne-like seats), with Phil on

a low chair at her side, was sweet, fascinating, alluring. It brought back thoughts of her own young love-making days, which seemed now, alas, so far away in the dim distance. If only those two could be bound one to the other as she and Rodney had been ! Ah, that unfortunate little girl in the country who was playing the game of fast and loose !

She went over to Lady Moulsey's side and offered to read her paper to her.

"Then they can talk," she said to herself, "or look or be silent just as they please. And if that Mr. Effingham comes this afternoon, I'll contrive somehow or other to see him alone, and I'll speak out plainly to him, and tell him it does not follow because a lady is good enough to let him paint her picture, therefore she has a special liking for him. Ridiculous —such an idea would frighten all charity out of one!"

As though in response to Lucy's kindly

intentions, before she had got through her second column of "Law Reports this Day," the servant entered, and announced the fact that Mr. Effingham had come, and had been shown into the room upstairs where his palette and easel had been left from the preceding day.

Phil jumped to his feet and took his hat. There came an unmistakable look of annoyance to his face. He had never before in his life spent so pleasant an hour in Ellinor's society, never before found her—after their first slight passage of arms—so womanly, so ductile, so winning. This was a sorry ending to it all.

"Why must you go?" asked Ellinor, looking up at him with soft eyes. "What objection can you have to my poor little artist friend?"

"I object to the whole genus, they are coxcombs to a man!" answered Phil, brusquely, savagely.

"So do I," chimed in Lucy, laying down her newspaper momentarily; "they invariably think permission to paint a lady's face gives equal right to say any amount of ridiculous things to her."

"Then why does the lady grant the permission in the first instance," said Phil coldly, still holding out his hand to say good-bye, "when she knows the inevitable consequence of her kindness?" and when he had said this he could not for the life of him make out how the words had found their way to his lips, any more than he could account to himself for the queer thrill of annoyance that went through him at the mere mention of this young artist's name.

"Why, indeed," murmured Ellinor in slow, thoughtful tones, and taking no notice of Phil's outstretched hand. "Lucy, ring the bell, please."

And when the servant came in answer to the bell, the order given was:

“Tell Mr. Effingham I cannot see him this morning. I will write to him in the course of the day.”

Phil’s hand fell to his side. Why—why what did this, could this mean? He threw at Ellinor one long, searching, questioning look—a look which she answered with another, soft, assuring, penetrating.

Lucy, from behind her newspaper, saw the look and the counter-look, and interpreted both according to her own hopes and wishes.

“He loves her—she loves him. Ah, that little girl at Stanham, who is playing fast and loose!”

Ellinor’s voice broke in on her thoughts. Only four words, but spoken with an emphasis that gave them the weight of forty.

“Now, will you go?” she asked, never once lifting her gaze from Phil’s face.

Phil made one desperate effort.

“ I must go—must go,” he said hurriedly, “ and at once.”

And with an energy and swiftness that would have done credit to a Queen’s Messenger, he said his adieu, and made his way down the stairs and out of the house.

With seven-leagued steps he strode back to his hotel, sat down to his luncheon, and got up from it, leaving it untasted. Then he strode out again—up Piccadilly, down Piccadilly, round all three parks in succession, went into a friend’s house, collared him just as he was sitting down to dinner, and carried him off to one of the Strand theatres. Astonished the said friend by starting up in the most thrilling part of the performance, leaving the box, and setting off on his peregrinations once more. This time he made the circuit of Bayswater, coming back by way of the Marble Arch, and returning to his hotel somewhere in the small hours of the morning.

The cause of Phil's perturbation may be stated in one sentence. He believed himself to be false in heart to little Edie Fairfax.

Like many men with tolerably clear consciences, he exaggerated the contemplation of a false step into the actual taking of the step itself.

"She looked at me with eyes of love. How did I look back at her?" he kept saying to himself with every tread he made on the frosty ground. "Oh, Edie—Edie, how shall I ever look you in the face again!"

Six o'clock that morning found Phil seated at a writing-table penning some half-dozen lines.

"**EDIE, EDIE**"—this was what he wrote—"For the love of Heaven, say I may come back to you, and let us be married right off at once. **PHILIP WICKHAM.**"

Some one else beside Phil was busy with pen and ink that morning before breakfast, and that was Lucy Selwyn.

After Phil had so abruptly left the house on the preceding day, from the extreme of animation Ellinor had passed to the extreme of taciturnity.

Lucy, absorbed in her own thoughts, did not observe the fact till at night, when she went, as she generally did, into Ellinor's dressing-room for a five minutes' chat before going to bed. Then she noted the weary look of Ellinor's eyes, the languid pose of head and arms, the slow, reluctant speech.

“Are you ill?” was her first question, to which Ellinor vouchsafed no reply.

Then Lucy curled herself about Ellinor's knees and feet in front of the low-burning fire, and looking up in the sad, beautiful face, cried out passionately :

“Oh, my darling, my darling, I wish I

could make you happy! I would lay down my life for you!"

Ellinor looked down on her wearily, and there fell a pause between the two girls.

"Does she love him, do you think?" whispered Lucy at length, knowing there was no need to mention names, as their thoughts must be flowing in one channel.

Ellinor opened her lips with energy.

"She love him!" she said bitterly. "Is a heartless flirt capable of love? I tell you she loves him no more than he loves her!"

Lucy crept away to her own room in silence, her thoughts very busy, her heart very full. She passed as restless a night as Phil. And the post the next day, with Phil's few hurried lines, carried also a letter from her to Miss Edie Fairfax.

CHAPTER XXXII.

WHILE all these young people were thus running riot in their youth and freshness, shedding floods of tears over every nettle that stung their feet, and calling the little bunches of weed-flowers they had gathered amaranth from the eternal plains, a sad old heart, behind closed shutters, in a room in Jermyn Street, was gathering together her dry leaves and memories of the past, and saying to herself, as she laid them in her bosom, "Here lies all that is left to me of hope and life."

Mrs. Thorne, alone in the dimly-lighted room, sits at her dead son's writing-table,

sorting, destroying, or setting on one side, as a sacred treasure, every scrap of written paper she finds therein.

The room has not been opened and aired, nor have the others which compose the suite, since Rodney's death. Only Mrs. Thorne comes daily alone with the key in her hand, lights the candles on the writing-table, and sits there some four or five unbroken hours, steadily going through her dismal task. Not a soul beside herself has crossed the threshold since that awful night when they bore the poor, disfigured, white-swathed form to his mother's house.

Just as she sees the room now, seated at Rodney's desk, in the half gloom, so was it when Rodney looked his last at it. There, on that sofa in the farther corner, lies his fur-lined dressing-gown; beside it, on the floor, stand his embroidered slippers, just as he threw them on one side before he set off to see his mother on that fateful evening.

Here, on a corner of the mantelpiece, lies his half-smoked cigar in a silver ash-tray. On the very writing-table at which his mother sits, there is a dark, ugly stain at one corner, which has eaten into the wood itself, and which “no fuller on earth” will be able to whiten away, let him try as he will.

Sometimes, as the mother sits unfolding and folding the dead man’s papers, her eye rests momentarily on this stain. Then her lips tighten, her brows draw together, and her eyes flash as might the eyes of some starving leopard in search of prey, or some jungle-tiger bereft of its young.

The room is furnished in lavish style. That painting, hanging over the secretaire, of Blue Gown, who won the Derby in '68, cost upwards of a thousand guineas; the jewelled inkstand and candlesticks, between four and five hundred pounds. The secretaire itself, with its inlaid woods, lapis

lazuli, and onyxes, was worth a small fortune, and every one of its carved drawers, when Mrs. Thorne sat down to it, had been crammed to overflowing with bills and divers memoranda of luxuries, works of art, jewellery, and *bric-à-brac* generally, enough to stock a shop in Bond Street.

But mixed with these divers bills and memoranda is manuscript of another sort, correspondence of a multifarious kind, closely-written diaries—for Rodney had ever been as diffuse with his pen as he had been with his silver and gold.

Sometimes, in spite of herself, the mother's lip would curl over the pages of some of these diaries, written with an almost feminine effusiveness, and describing passages in the young man's life for which she could not have the slightest sympathy. Although, to herself, she would not even have owned the fact, certain it was that, in fancy, Rodney stood before her now with

less of the god and more of the mire about him than in days gone by. Most of these diaries, in fact the greater portion of Rodney's MSS., she had one by one consumed with a taper in the fire-place. A whole heap of ashes lay there—a hecatomb of futile virtues, puerile vices, crushed hopes; desires, longings, and aspirations come to naught.

Mrs. Thorne thanks God that she is drawing near the end of her weary task. Yet, even as she does so, she asks herself what other task has she to set to work upon when this is ended. None, save that of counting the slow-creeping weeks and months till the great night comes which puts an end to all labour.

Two things only remained now to be done at that writing-table: one was the scanning of a packet of letters, all in Lucy Selwyn's writing, and tied carefully with a silken cord; the other was the piecing to-

gether of some tiny fragments of paper which she had found scattered about the floor and writing-table when she had first entered the room. They were evidently the last morsels of writing from Rodney's hand before he dealt his death to himself.

Mrs. Thorne had carefully collected them and placed them on one side. They would take hours to piece together. No one but a mother hungering and thirsting for a last message from her dead son, would have undertaken such a labour.

Again and again had she taken up the packet of Lucy's letters, and again and again had laid them down. Now should she scan them—the feeble, wicked things that they were!—or should she commit them, unread, to the flames? She could picture to herself exactly of what fabric they were composed—fustian to their very last thread, of course, with just that sickly odour of romantic sentiment hanging about them

which girls in that class of life have perpetually oozing from their finger-tips. Yes, better burn them. By-and-by time or chance might give her the opportunity of rewarding this girl according to her deserts. It was the one thing in life to which she looked forward with any—the faintest—glow of anticipation. Nothing these letters could contain would weaken this purpose of hers, nothing add to its strength; so let them burn for the worthless trash that they were!

They were a thick, goodly packet of letters; they would take a long time consuming with a taper, for fire there was none on the hearth. Mrs. Thorne cut the silk cord, preparing to toss them one by one into the grate. They fell apart in a loose heap. At the same moment, there fluttered out from beneath the flap of one envelope a tiny scrap of paper, apparently torn from a lady's purse-memorandum-book, on which

was scribbled in pencil the following sentence :

“ Why were you not at Lady Cotswold’s last night? I have something to say to you. Don’t forget—the Park to-morrow morning—near the Magazine. E. Y.”

Mrs. Thorne had picked up the scrap of paper and mechanically read it before she realised what she was doing. Then she sat staring at it, as one might who, counting over his bank-notes and telling to himself his riches, comes suddenly upon an unpaid bill, which swamps the whole lot.

Lucy Selwyn, then, had not been the only woman who had held this poor weak heart in thrall. Great Heavens—what revelations were at hand now?

Who was E. Y.?

And here Mrs. Thorne ran mentally over all the names beginning with a “Y” she had known or heard of in society.

There were the Youngs, and the Yelver-

tons, and the Yorkes—all in Lady Cotswold's set. Plenty of girls among them, plenty of good looks, plenty of "E's" too, no doubt, if she only knew their christian-names. There was an Emily Young, and—Great Heavens!—an Ellinor Yorke, the *débutante* of two seasons back, whose beauty and grace had been on every lip, as well, also, her coldness and coquetry.

Mrs. Thorne sat mutely staring at the slip of paper for full five minutes. Then, with a new light breaking into her brain, she took up Lucy's letters, and began slowly in their order to read them. Took them up with a sigh and a heavy heart, laid them down with a deeper sigh and a heavier heart, as all unwelcomed the truth forced itself upon her that this young girl whom she had looked upon as a Delilah, to be lightly won and lightly cast on one side, had been nothing less than her son's good angel till his own

weak, wayward hands had pushed her out of his path.

They were letters that any mother might have been proud to call of her daughter's writing, that any wife, looking back in middle life to her girlish days, might have rejoiced to say: "These were of my penning. So I wrote to my young lover when hearts beat at their fullest," letters which breathed on every line the truest, deepest devotion, which expressed the girl herself, her simple, pure womanhood, as faithfully as photographer's camera or artist's pencil might have done.

Mrs. Thorne gave a long sigh, pushed the letters away, and drew the torn scraps of paper before her in a little heap. She looked at her candles, she drew out her watch. To piece that little heap of fragments into legibility and coherence meant hours of patient labour. So be it. Hours

of patient labour she was prepared to spend over them. Who was there to say her nay if she chose to lose her eyesight in the task, and had to feel her way back to the dreary house in Eaton Square?

So the hours of patient labour were expended, and their result was some half-dozen consecutive lines of Rodney's delicate, feminine handwriting.

They ran as follows :

“ To ELLINOR YORKE.

“ My death lies at your door. Had we never met I might have led a happy life, or, at least, an honourable one. I pray God, none other may have cause to curse you as I do now.

“ RODNEY THORNE.”

These, then, were Rodney's last words, words which he no doubt intended to leave behind to proclaim to the world the false-

ness of the woman he had so madly loved, and which a softer moment—the last before death—had induced him to tear into fragments.

The mother sat staring at it stonily, yet withal with a fire tearing at her heart that might have heated and cracked marble itself.

To her those torn fragments were Rodney's voice speaking from the tomb.

At last words came to her. She spoke them out aloud in the semi-gloom—the “fowls of the air” might have once heard much such a deep, harsh, twanging voice as this mother's, when Rizpah, some centuries back, spread her sackcloth upon the rock.

“As I do now,” she said, repeating Rodney's words. “My boy, if you are anywhere near me now, hear me repeat your own curse upon this woman. As I do now curse her, as I ever will curse her

till her life or mine shall end ! Hear me, Rodney," and now the mother uplifted her face and raised her hand on high as though in very truth her son bent over her as she stood, " and let your curse a thousand-fold multiplied fall upon me if I fail to pay back to this woman the bitterness, the misery, the desolateness, she has brought into your life and mine. Yea, and amen ! "

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE winter that year was bleak and bitter enough to set the hearts of all those who owned skates, and knew how to use them, bounding and thrilling, and to drive all the hunting men, who were not literally chained to Stanham, up in a flock to London and their clubs.

Edie Fairfax was the life and soul of the local skating-club. The broad sheet of ice on the Hall lake made a pretty picture every afternoon, with its crowd of young, fur-enveloped figures, with their rose-red cheeks and swift, glancing, dancing feet. Edie lived in her skates. The frozen lake

was about the finest outlet she ever could have for her restless, nervous energy.

“ I’ve no doubt,” she said to herself, as she went skimming with the fleetness of a swallow over the glassy surface, “ if Ellinor stood on that bank watching us all, she would say : ‘ Call that skating ! Stand on one side, all of you, and I’ll show you how to carry your head and shoulders ! ’ But for all that, I dare say her dignity would get more bumps on the back of its head than my insignificance does.” And on she went, the cynosure of many admiring eyes, and not a few envious ones.

Among the former may be classed Lord Winterdowne’s, behind their gold-rimmed glasses. As Edie lived in her skates, so he appeared to have taken up his abode on the bank of the lake. Nothing would tempt him on the ice. The possibility of cutting a ludicrous or undignified figure kept him well away among the reeds and willows. at

the edge of the pond. Those same reeds and willows, too, saw a good deal of Colonel Wickham just then, for, somehow, since he had broken off from his "vital statistics," the Colonel had spent a good deal of time at the Hall, and had formed an odd, unsympathetic sort of intimacy with Lord Winterdowne.

"It's queer those two men don't take more heartily to each other," the Squire would say to himself sometimes, noting their invariable divergence of opinion on every matter, small or great. "You would think they would fit each other like hand and glove. They have each of them a good head for figures, they go in for the same fads, yet there they are sparring from morning till night—for ever at cross-purposes. The puzzle is why they don't keep out of each other's way. It looks rather as if Wickham were mounting guard for Master Phil. Eh, that's what it must be!"

And not displeased with the conclusion at which he had arrived, Mr. Fairfax went on his way, making himself as agreeable as he could to both gentlemen, getting, meantime, his own modicum of enjoyment out of the friendly intercourse in the shape of nightly whist-parties, held in turn at the Hall, the Castle, or Wickham Place.

Edie took the attentions of both gentlemen easily and pleasantly, or indifferently and carelessly, according to the mood she chanced to be in. She would go down to the ice with one, she would return with the two, and then, perhaps, if they chanced to accept her father's invitation, and stay dinner, she would suddenly announce the fact that she was tired to death, and would go straight upstairs to bed, instead of taking her place at the head of the table.

“The truth of it is, Edie,” said the Squire, as he began sorting his letters at the breakfast-table one morning, “you are

developing into a most heartless little flirt, and if those men call each other out, and one of them gets a bullet, you'll have to answer for it."

Edie jumped up from her chair in a perfect whirlwind.

"I a flirt! Oh, papa, how dreadfully, dreadfully wicked of you to say so!" she cried, getting crimson—face, neck, ears, and all. "Why, if I tried to flirt, I couldn't—I shouldn't know how. The idea of such a thing! I know I'm full of faults; I'm self-willed and quick-tempered; I'm obstinate and unbearable; but whatever else I am, I'm not a flirt!"

The Squire went on sorting his letters with unusual rapidity. He began to feel—to use a common phrase—that he had "put his foot in it," and the sooner he got it out again the better.

He tossed a letter across to his little daughter:

“One for you, my dear—two—here’s a third.”

But Edie was not to be so easily diverted.

“I’m not a flirt, papa—I say I’m not a flirt! Whatever else bad and wicked I may be, I’m not that!” she kept repeating.

Self-measurement is a proverbially unsatisfactory process. A good tailor will decline to make a suit from a home-taken measure. Yet here was little Edie, with all the wisdom and confidence of her eighteen years, saying, over and over again, with a great many tosses of her small head, “I know I’m this, I know I’m that, I know I’m the other, but whatever else I am, I’m not a flirt.”

The Squire thankfully came upon an envelope which he felt confident would stem the torrent of Edie’s indignation.

“I think you know that handwriting, my dear. You may have seen it once

before," he said mischievously, right across her one hundred and fiftieth assertion that, whatever else she was, she was "not a flirt."

Edie picked it up with a great joyous thrill in her heart. From Phil at last! She knew it before she looked at it.

The door opened at this moment, and Lord Winterdowne came in close upon the servant's heels.

"Are you going on the ice this morning, Miss Fairfax?" he asked as he shook hands. "Pardon such an early visit, but I am going up to London to-day; it is the only hour I could command."

Edie clutched at her letters. Politeness must go to the four winds. The thing now was to get out of the room as quickly as possible, shut herself up, and devour them, or rather it, for there was only one she would have risked her life to save had the house been on fire.

“No, I’m not going on the ice this morning—perhaps not to-morrow morning—perhaps not for a whole week—perhaps never again, for the frost may break at any moment—in fact, I’m sure there is rain in the air, and I dare say there’ll be a deluge before night,” she answered all in a breath, taking a step towards the door with every word she spoke.

Lord Winterdowne only took in about a quarter of the words she said, and certainly not a fiftieth part of what she meant.

He looked at her vaguely.

“Are you very—very busy this morning?” he began a little hesitatingly.

“Yes, dreadfully—dreadfully—dreadfully busy,” answered Edie, getting outside the door with her last word. “I really don’t know which way to turn.”

“I particularly want—ah!—to—to see you alone this morning for five minutes.

Is it not possible?" he asked, stammering a little, and looking as uncomfortable as it was possible for a man of his decorous deportment to look.

Edie all in a flash guessed his meaning.

"Oh, utterly—utterly impossible," she said, standing outside now in the hall, and looking longingly at the flight of stairs leading to the upper quarters.

"Then may I come to-morrow morning at this hour?" persisted Lord Winterdowne, evidently bent on securing an interview.

Edie felt she must get rid of him somehow.

"Yes; to-morrow at this time if you like," she answered carelessly, and then looked round to find that Colonel Wickham had come up the front steps while she was talking, and now stood behind, looking down on her.

Not a doubt but that he had heard the

posts when people wanted them, just as there were special trains for garden parties and weddings. Well, anyhow she would write her letter at once, and take it herself to the post. That would be one step towards putting Phil out of his misery. So straight to the writing-table she went, pushing her other letters on one side with her foot, and dashed off a brief missive in something under a minute and a half.

“DEAR—DEAR PHIL,” she wrote, “come back as soon as ever you like, and let things be just anyhow you please. *Entre nous*, I think I have been just a little bit of a goose.

“Your own

“EDIE.”

There! He would understand exactly all she meant to say without making a long letter of it. Phil always did understand

her. Whoever else made mistakes about her, Phil never did. And here Edie, leaning back in her chair, fell into one of her old pleasant day-dreams, the like of which she had not indulged in since she and Phil had kissed under the walnut-tree, and of which it would be no exaggeration to say Phil was its Alpha and Omega, its middle and back-bone also.

Presently her eye chanced upon the letters still on the floor—three in number. Oh, there could be no hurry for those ; they might wait. She gave them another little push with her foot. Ah, that was from Phœbe Macpherson (a housemaid who had married from the Hall, and whose first child was Edie's god-daughter), and this was from the London dressmaker who had sent down her Christmas ball-dresses ; but whom was that other from ? The writing was not familiar to her. It might want an answer by the next post.

She picked up the letter in the strange handwriting, broke the seal, and read as follows :

“ DEAR MADAM,

“ I must ask you to pardon the liberty which I, an utter stranger, am taking in thus writing to you. I can only plead as my excuse my warm gratitude and sincere friendship towards one whom, for want of fuller knowledge on the matter, I am compelled to describe only as an old friend of yours—Mr. Philip Wickham.

“ I fear the question I am about to ask will seem an unwarrantable, unpardonable impertinence on my part. I know it is such, yet I feel bound to ask it, and must trust to your charity and right judgment to accord my pardon. It is simply this : ‘Are you sure you have the love of the man whom you have partly released from his engagement to you ? Are you sure

that his hopes and wishes are not fixed in another quarter?' I beseech you to get a true and unmistakable answer to this question, as much for your own sake as for his.

"I must beg of you not to mistake my motives in thus writing to you. Mr. Wickham never has been, never can be to me, more than the greatest benefactor a friendless girl could have. I am as much widowed as though I wore wedding-ring and weeds. But there is one to whom Mr. Wickham might be infinitely more than benefactor and friend if he were free to act according to the dictates of his heart—one, too, in every way worthy of a true man's true love, and to whose keeping his happiness might be safely entrusted.

"Dear madam, again I must ask your pardon for the liberty I am taking in thus writing to you. Again I must plead, as my one and only excuse, a debt of grati-

tude so heavy towards the two persons to whom I have alluded, that it makes me heedless of the common conventionalities of life.

“L. S.”

Edie dropped the letter as she read the last word, not as though the paper had stung her, but as though her fingers had suddenly congealed into marble, and the power of touch and grasp had been withdrawn. The power of thought, of feeling, of utterance, seemed also to have left her, and for a moment she leaned back in her chair, with brain as blank as that of the poor little frozen starling she had found dead on her window-ledge that morning.

Only for a moment, however. The next, all her senses came back to her with a rush, and seemed intensified a thousand-fold. She jumped to her feet; she tore the letter she had just penned to Phil into a hundred frag-

ments ; she crumpled up Phil's few lines, and tossed them into the fire.

“ I see—I see ! ” she said aloud passionately. “ I understand it all now. He wanted to save his honour, to marry me out of hand, and be done with it, lest his resolution might fail him.”

She picked up Lucy's letter, and read through the bitter words once more. Who “ L. S. ” was she had not the remotest notion. It had so chanced that, though Phil had long ago mentioned to Edie the fact of Rodney Thorne's engagement “ to a little girl in Paris,” Miss Selwyn's name had not been mentioned, or, if it had had a passing allusion, it had, somehow, not fixed itself in Edie's memory.

However that might be, it could not matter two straws who or what “ L. S. ” was. One fact was patent from the tone of her letter—viz., that she knew very well what she was writing about. No doubt she

had seen a great deal of Phil in London, and had had the fact forced upon her notice that he had transferred his affections to a person to whom she was evidently under great obligations.

There was one mistake she had made.

“Partly released him, have I?” cried Edie, a great wave of indignant pride sweeping over her. “He shall soon find himself as free as words of mine can make him.”

Back to her writing-table she went once more. In a little over three minutes another note was written, and addressed to Phil. It was somewhat different in tone from the first.

Thus it ran :

“DEAR PHIL,

“Was it not wise of me to insist that we should both take time to consider our engagement, and have a year’s respite from

it? If it won't make any difference to you, I should like to consider myself free from to-day, for, to be quite honest with you, some one else has slipped into your place while you have been away, and I'm not at all disposed to turn him out. Do not trouble to write in reply. I will consider your silence to signify assent.

“ Believe me, always your friend,

“ EDITH FAIRFAX.”

And then, the letter signed and sealed, she bowed her head on the writing-table, crying aloud, with dry eyes and breaking heart:

“ Oh, Phil, Phil! must I give you up? Why did you not take a knife and stab me to the heart? It would have been far less cruel.”

A knock at her door made her lift her head, and old Janet came in to say Colonel Wickham wanted particularly to speak to her.

Edie got her thoughts back with difficulty.

“Colonel Wickham — Colonel Wickham!” she repeated vaguely.

She looked from Janet’s face to the clock. Only half-past ten now, and she seemed to have been shut in there with her letters a hundred years at least.

Old Janet grew uneasy.

“Are you ill, Miss Edie? Have you a bad headache, you look so white?” she asked.

The hot blood came in a rush to Edie’s face.

“Ill?” she cried, with dancing eyes; “I never felt better in my life. Ask Colonel Wickham to come up into my sitting-room, if he must see me; and, Janet, take this letter, it is very important, and put it in the post with your own hand.”

And here she tossed her letter to Phil across the table to the old servant.

Colonel Wickham, coming into the room

a minute after, would have endorsed Edie's words, and vowed that, with eyes and cheeks so brilliantly coloured, she never could have felt better in her life.

By way of contrast, possibly — Nature takes a savage delight at times in striking sharp, uncouth key-notes of contrast — Colonel Wickham looked unusually solemn and gray that morning.

“ I thought you would have come down to have a chat with me, Edie,” he said a little reproachfully ; “ I have been waiting downstairs to see you. Your father has gone off to Four Fields’ Farm. Lord Winterdowne has gone with him.”

He said Lord Winterdowne’s name with a marked emphasis, looking keenly at Edie meanwhile.

Four Fields’ Farm was a farm owned by the Squire, and was situated some five or six miles outside the parish.

Edie jumped to her feet.

"Oh, how could papa go without me?" she cried. "I told him I particularly wanted to ride with him this morning."

In her heart she felt as she said this as though she would have given her soul there and then to get on Coquette's back, and go riding on, on, on for ever, over the frosty fields, right to the other end of the world, if they could only have spun themselves out in front of her as she went along.

"I told him, Edie, I particularly wanted to speak to you this morning, so he was good enough not to send up to you," said the Colonel in a yet graver tone than before. "I wanted to ask you if you had any news of Phil. It is so long since I heard from him I am getting rather uneasy about him."

"Uneasy?" laughed Edie; "there was never less cause for uneasiness in your whole life. He is quite well, and as happy —oh, as happy as a man could be."

“Have you heard from him this morning? What does he say?”

“Oh, nothing much worth repeating. A silly little letter; I tossed it into the fire a minute ago. He wants me to marry him right off in a tremendous hurry. Ridiculous!” And here Edie gave a right-down merry little laugh.

But Colonel Wickham grew graver and graver.

“I see nothing to laugh at, Edie. I see nothing ridiculous in a man wanting to marry the girl he’s engaged to, when they’re as fond of each other as you and Phil are.”

“Oh, but we’re not fond of each other—that’s the best of it!” laughed Edie again; “we are both heartily sick and tired of each other, and I’ve written to Phil this morning, telling him I want to be released from my share of the compact—that I mean to be—yes, that’s what I said—mean to be—mean to be!”

And here Edie jumped up in a flutter from her chair, and began putting pens, ink, and paper together with tremendous despatch.

Colonel Wickham went over to her side, took both her hands in his, and made her look up at him.

“Edie, what does this mean?” he asked, and now his gravity resolved itself into positive sternness.

Edie began to tremble violently.

“Oh, it’s all easily understood,” she cried, struggling hard to release herself.

But the Colonel would not let her hands go.

“It is not easily understood,” he said. “Have you and Phil had a quarrel?”

“A quarrel! Oh dear no, what is there to quarrel about when we are both of one mind? We are tired of each other—that’s all, nothing more.”

“Tired of each other! After all these years!”

“That’s just it. It is ‘all these years’ that have tired us out. Why won’t you believe me? Do people never, never get tired of each other and break off engagements? Oh, let go my hands, please. Why won’t you understand?” and here Edie stamped violently on the floor, feeling that little by little her power of self-control was evaporating.

“I have one more question to ask, Edie, and then I will let you go. Tell me and be honest with me, I entreat, has your acquaintance with Lord Winterdowne had anything to do with your getting tired of Phil?”

Edie’s head drooped. She could scarcely bring herself to tell a down-right lie—to slander as it were her own soul and its powers of loving—yet here was a splendid opportunity for putting a stop to all this tiresome questioning, and leaving herself and Phil free to shape their courses as they thought fit.

"Oh, why do you ask such questions?" she said, freeing her hands with a sudden jerk, and walking away from him to the window. "You ought to be satisfied with what I tell you."

He followed her into the window-recess.

"I ask the question, Edie, because about an hour or so ago I heard you make an appointment to see that man alone to-morrow morning. You don't mean to tell me you are going to throw Phil over for a man of that stamp?"

"Oh, what can it matter to anybody but myself what I do or don't do——" she began vehemently.

He cut her vehemence short.

"It would matter to me greatly, Edie. I have known you ever since you were a baby, and"—this added in hushed, reverential tones—"I knew your mother also."

Edie's self-control was going, going—gone now. She flung herself on the ground

almost at the Colonel's feet, hiding her face in the cushions of the window-seat.

"Go away—go away!" she cried passionately; "why won't you leave me to myself? I want to be alone—don't you understand?"

He stooped over her as a father might over some wilful, passionate child bent on defying authority and getting its punishment doubled.

"I will go away, Edie, directly you look up in my face and give me your word you have not the slightest intention of marrying Lord Winterdowne."

In his own mind he felt convinced this pair of lovers had had some desperate quarrel—a quarrel in which it might be that Phil's usually serene temper had given way. No doubt a peace between them could easily enough be effected if only sufficient time could be had wherein to negotiate it. He knew, however, little

Edie's pride and lawlessness of temper, and dreaded lest in one sudden irrevocable moment she might render all such negotiation impossible.

Edie's voice seemed to come in muffled gasps from out of the cushions.

"I won't look up—I won't give you my word—I will marry just anybody and everybody I please."

He looked down on her pityingly.

"Get up, Edie," he said gently, "and let us talk the matter out quietly. Remember I've given you good advice ever since you were a baby out of arms and used to come to me with your scratches and bruised elbows."

His voice had more of authority in it than before. Edie's wilfulness yielded so far as to let her get up off the carpet and stand for a moment facing him, looking right into those kindly eyes of his.

His face showed grave and marble-white.

Hers by rights should have had a river of tears streaming adown it for the pain that was racking her poor little heart. Instead, however, it was dry, flushed scarlet-red, with eyes bright and staring.

Colonel Wickham looked at the window-seat.

“Come, sit down, Edie,” he began, “and let us talk quietly of whom you will or will not marry.”

But Edie had no intention of doing anything so rational. Her spirit of defiance would hold out just another sixty seconds, she felt—no longer. With the sixty-first must come collapse and humility. Well, she must get as quickly as she could into solitude, and not make an exhibition of herself for Colonel Wickham’s benefit.

“I will marry just whoever I please,” she answered in somewhat high-pitched key, and making for the door as she spoke with rapid though unsteady steps; “no one

shall say to me, 'Marry that man—marry this one.' I will marry Lord Winterdowne if I like, or I'll marry Mr. Rumsey's curate, or papa's head-groom, or old Jeffreys, the gardener, or Whitelock, the old bell-ringer or anybody I like on the other side of sixty I hate and abominate men at six-and-twenty ; they're odious and hateful, every one of them."

Her last sentence carried her out of the room.

Colonel Wickham stood looking after her wonderingly, pityingly. How his heart yearned over this petulant, wilful child ! Ah, these foolish young things, if they did but know ! If only one could make them see the right road and put their feet in it ; or, better still, if one could only gather them into one's arms and carry them over all the rough, thorny places in life ! Now, supposing for a moment this bright, lovable little Edie had given her heart into

his keeping instead of into Phil's, how tenderly——

But here the Colonel gave a great start, and put an abrupt stop to his thinking.

“You old idiot!” he said to himself; “you, of all men in the world!”

Then he went straight home to his lonely old house, sat down to his trim writing-table, and wrote the longest, most peremptory letter to Phil that his steel nibs had ever accomplished.

It was full of straightforward questions, such as, “What has happened to put you and Edie on such a distant footing? Is it her doing or yours that your engagement collapses now?” and so forth. But the gist of the whole letter was contained in the last sentence, which ran as follows:

“But whatever has taken place between you, don't try to mend matters with pen-and-ink. Come down at once, see Edie,

and face to face have your explanations. On this I must strongly insist."

Phil, however, did not get this letter till the post after he had received Edie's. His reply to it was despatched promptly enough in the form of a telegram, which ran as follows :

"Impossible for me to come down.
Miss Fairfax will explain."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

COLONEL WICKHAM took Phil's telegram in his hand, and went off at once with it to the Hall.

"Now, Edie shall give me an explanation; I won't go without one," he said, as he made his way over the frosty tangle of the shrubbery, in and out among the bare brown hazel-rods.

But when the Colonel reached the Hall he found that Edie had not made her appearance that morning, pleading as an excuse a bad headache.

"Come in and have some breakfast, Wickham," called the Squire to him, as he

heard the Colonel's voice outside in the hall. "The truth of it is, the barometer is low—very low this morning, the atmosphere is uncommonly heavy, and we may have a gale before night." Then he added in subdued tones as Colonel Wickham came into the breakfast-room: "My own opinion is that Edie and Phil haven't hit it off at all lately. However, I don't see that you or I will mend matters by interfering—best let them alone, and they'll right themselves."

Colonel Wickham, however, was not disposed to view things in quite so cheery a light. It seemed to him that matters at that moment called not only for interference, but for interference of a strenuous and energetic sort. He declined the Squire's invitation to breakfast, and announced his intention of running up to London to say a few words to Phil.

The Squire laughed and shook his head.

“ Better let them alone, Wickham; they’ll make it up right enough,” he said. “ Why, bless my soul, we shall have enough to do if we interfere in all the quarrels they’ll have between now and their wedding-day !”

Colonel Wickham, however, held to his purpose.

“ Phil and I must have a reckoning together,” he said to himself—not to the Squire—so he saved the next London train, and arrived at Phil’s hotel somewhere late in the afternoon.

It may be questioned whether the reckoning Colonel Wickham was to have with Phil could be heavier than the one Phil was having with himself at that very moment.

When a young man of six-and-twenty, with nothing of the Werther in his composition, says to himself—and means it, “ I envy those brave fellows who are lying like dogs in the trenches before

Tel-el-Kebir," it may be imagined that things have not been going on oiled wheels with him lately.

Edie's note had fallen like the crash of a thunderbolt at his feet. It startled him at first almost out of his senses—he was prepared for any amount of refractoriness and playful teasing, but not for a letter written in this strain, with a sledge-hammer for a pen—the next moment it appeared to him a positive revelation. In its light he seemed to see, understand, and be able to piece together into coherence all Edie's wild vagaries and apparently inconsequential sayings and doings.

That was what it had meant all along. When she had been so anxious to suspend their engagement for a time, it must have been her own heart, not his, she was thinking of; when she had coquettled, and played, and trifled with him, it had not been, as he had thought, from mere girlish light-

ness of heart, but because her fancy must have been veering from one man to the other; and now that all let and hindrance to its fluctuations had been removed, in the shape of his own personal presence and influence at Stanham, it had settled, and no doubt permanently, upon the one most to its taste.

Who that one was, naturally was the next question that arose. A question, however, that Phil had scarce asked himself before he had answered it. There could be but one answer to it, as certainly as there had been but one man beside himself at Stanham for whom Edie had ever shown the slightest predilection. That man was Colonel Wickham. And hereupon Phil fell to torturing himself by recalling a whole world of words and looks Edie had from time to time bestowed upon his uncle, winding up with that memorable evening when she had gone knee-deep into a

flirtation with the Colonel, and he—Phil—had turned upon her with the question, “Was she making up her mind to be his aunt ?”

The matter did not admit of a doubt, it seemed to him.

“The next thing I shall hear will be that they are going to be married, I suppose,” he said to himself savagely. “Well, I shall have done something with myself before that desirable event comes to pass, not a doubt, though what that something is, Heaven only knows.”

Under circumstances such as these, the first thing a man generally longs for is a revolver, with exactly three bullets—one for the woman who has played him false, another for the man who has led her on to do it, the third for himself. Phil experienced to the full this generic feeling of the race. He had his share of the wild-beast passions organic alike in saint and sinner. He kept them down, in a measure,

and after the first fierceness of his passion had blazed itself out, his mood changed, there fell a great bitterness of spirit upon him. He scoffed at the whole race of women. They never had been, and never would be, capable of a grand, true passion such as men were in the habit of wasting upon them—the more fools they!—of a passion which, once fixed, could never veer, but must end only with life itself.

And then he scoffed at himself and his own heart for having been simple enough to pin his life's happiness on the faith of a little girl of eighteen.

How could he have been idiotic enough to expect to be treated differently from the rest of mankind? If Providence were in the habit of making exceptions in the case of born idiots and securing special favours for them, then he might have had a chance; but as Providence invariably put idiots and wise men on the same footing, and treated both

with impartial injustice, his fate was exactly what might have been expected.

Well, thank Heaven, he had learnt his lesson for life. It would never need to be repeated. Henceforth women would be to him what they were to most men of the world—nothing more, nothing less—just creatures to toy with, to flirt with, to amuse oneself with, and occasionally to marry if convenience demanded it, and the creatures were exceptionally well-looking.

This mood would in due course, no doubt, give place to another, in which Phil's better self would once more get the upper hand ; but it held sway for a tolerably long period, and helped to push things a little faster downhill than they were already going. Under its influence, he spent two long mornings in Ellinor Yorke's society—mornings during which, to say the least, his conduct was remarkable and his manner was pronounced.

That is to say, he went headlong, neck or nothing, into the wildest, maddest of flirtations a man could be capable of. Ellinor's soft, languid glances he returned with long, steady, expressive ones. "She evidently likes to be looked at; why shouldn't I look?" was the argument he used in defence of this misconduct of his eyes; to be supplemented later on by another plea of like kind: "She likes to be flirted with; why shouldn't I flirt? It's an equal game; we are neither of us handicapped by that foolish thing called a heart."

If an equal game, it was, however, also a dangerous game, as Phil, before it was over, was to find out. Lucy looked on, a little puzzled and a little frightened at what she felt sure must in some sort be the result of her own handiwork. When she had penned her letter to Edie, it had seemed to her she was doing an act all but heroic in its daring and defiance of the

conventionalities of life. Results of some sort of necessity she had expected, but scarcely such immediate and tempestuous results as these. She had thought it possible he might come round and see them ; tell the story of his lovemaking with the little girl at Stanham ; how heartlessly she had played her game of fast and loose ; how thankful he was to get his liberty back again. And then, in due course, no doubt, he would once more have resigned his liberty —this time into the loyal and tender keeping of Ellinor. But, as it was, “in due course” were words that seemed to have no meaning for him. Without preamble of any sort, he had plunged into the hottest, oddest form of lovemaking imaginable—a sort of thing, it seemed to her, that might have gone on between lunatic Creoles or Spaniards about a couple of hundred years back, but certainly not to be expected of a sane lady and gentleman in a nineteenth-century drawing-room.

Getting back to his hotel from one of these wild, reckless, lovemaking mornings, Phil was met by the waiter with the news that Colonel Wickham was waiting to see him—had been waiting, in fact, for more than an hour and a half.

“He’s been a-standing like a statue at the window, with a pencil in his hand, the whole hour and a half, sir,” pursued the friendly waiter as Phil made his way upstairs.

Now this was an exaggeration; a quarter of an hour was the outside limit of Colonel Wickham’s statue-like attitude; a quarter of an hour, which, when Phil entered, had not quite run itself out. Burdened as the Colonel’s mind was with the heaviest anxieties, with the arrangement of affairs that before anything else demanded a clear brain and a light hand, he had nevertheless found it impossible to resist the force of old habits and associations. This room—

for the nonce Phil's sitting-room—he had occupied annually for the past fifteen or twenty years during his periodical visits to London, and at one of its windows he had also annually taken some most interesting notes for his book of metropolitan statistics. The said book, on a certain page, showed the exact amount of traffic that passed along a certain street leading off the Strand during a quarter of an hour of the busiest time of day: how many foot-passengers, how many travellers in hansom and other cabs, how many waggons, carts, or carriages. At the end of every seven years these returns had been balanced against increased population in the metropolis, and the result showed in interesting figures at the foot of the page.

Phil, when he saw his uncle's watch on the window-ledge beside him, and the pencil and note-book in his hand, knew exactly what process of calculation was

going on, and that nothing short of an earthquake must be allowed to interrupt it. It did not add to the serenity of his temper to have to stand silent and unoccupied for exactly three and a half minutes. He walked across to the mantelpiece, leaned his long arms among the spill-cases and candlesticks, and took a steady survey of himself in the looking-glass.

“What a confounded hang-dog appearance I have this morning!” he thought; “look as if I had not been in bed for a month;” and then he lifted his eyes a little higher, and found that his uncle had put away his note-book and pencil, and now stood looking over his shoulder at the self-same reflection.

Evidently with the same thought in his mind, for as Phil turned round to shake hands his first question was, “So you’ve been keeping late hours, eh?” then without waiting for Phil’s reply, he plunged

into his subject at once with, "I suppose you have been expecting to see me, Phil, and can guess pretty well what I've come to talk about?"

Phil was ready for him.

"I am delighted to see you," he answered. "Now I can have the pleasure of personally congratulating you."

It was said sarcastically, cruelly, in a tone that Phil did not often use, and with a look in his blue eyes which his uncle, at any rate, had never seen there before.

Colonel Wickham's face showed blank for a moment in his astonishment, then he frowned heavily.

"On what do you ground your congratulations, may I ask?" he said shortly, sternly.

"On the fact of your engagement to Miss Fairfax." How the words seemed to stick in his throat! "I suppose by this time it is an accomplished fact," answered

Phil boldly, staring his uncle full in the face.

The Colonel returned the stare with brows levelling more and more.

“What reason have you for supposing such a thing?” he asked.

“A very good reason,” this with a short, untuneful laugh: “the young lady’s own statement in the short letter she wrote to me, breaking off our engagement.”

“Wha—at!” and now the Colonel’s brows broke their level line, and arched instead. “Do you mean to tell me that Edie wrote to you breaking off your engagement?”

“I do. Why shouldn’t she if she felt so disposed?”

“Without any previous communication from you?”

“Without any communication from me that would warrant her doing so. The only time I wrote to her it was to beg her to hasten, not retard our marriage.”

"And in her letter to you my name was mentioned?"

"Oh, as good as mentioned," answered Phil, with the same unpleasant laugh as before. "When a young lady tells you she infinitely prefers some one else to yourself, you naturally set your brains to work to find out who that other person is. I did so, at any rate, and could come to but one conclusion."

Hitherto the two men had been standing still, staring at one another, but now, as Phil finished speaking, the Colonel suddenly turned his back on him, walked slowly across the room to a chair, sank into it, leaning back, looking white, and troubled, and old.

What a train of thought Phil was opening up with his hard, careless, mistaken speeches! What a temptation it was to receive those speeches as gospel truth, to believe that this young girl, with all her

sweetness and youth about her, had really preferred him—the world-worn, weary old man—to this fine young fellow before him, had loved him all along through her waywardness and coquetry, and at last her honest, true heart had compelled her to make the admission to her young lover.

“There’s nothing half so sweet in life as Love’s young dream,” save and except only Love’s old one. Colonel Wickham, in the love-dream he was opening his heart to at that moment, seemed to see his old one embodied and given back to him. In Edie at that moment he seemed to see Edie’s mother, stretching out her arms to him, and saying with one of her sweet bygone smiles :

“See! I cheated you out of your happiness once long ago; take it back now a thousand times sweeter than it was before!”

And yet—and yet! it was hard to

understand. There were things that wanted explaining.

Phil did not interrupt his uncle's train of memories. He stretched his long limbs, walked across to the window, folded his arms on the ledge, and looked out. The other window of the room looked down on the busy street; this across a narrow roadway on the river. Barges were passing along—a City steamboat with just half-a-dozen people on board. Among them a soldier in scarlet coat, and a girl. Very close together they sat, and the man seemed to be talking and bending low over the girl as though he were saying sweet things to her. Lovers, of course! What a couple of fools! And yet—and yet—heigho!—sometimes folly was better than wisdom!

Colonel Wickham found his voice at last.

“Do you mind showing me Edie's letter, Phil,” he asked a little unsteadily, “if you have it at hand?”

Phil continued looking down at the river, and the soldier, and the girl.

“I should be delighted—only I haven’t it at hand,” he answered, without turning his head. “Don’t know what I did with it—tossed it in the fire, I suppose, or perhaps I lighted my pipe with it.”

“Can you tell me the exact words she made use of?”

“Sorry I can’t. I’ve forgotten. They were short and plain enough, however, and conveyed clearly to my mind what they meant.”

“It’s a mystery,” muttered the Colonel. “I don’t see my way quite.” It was said half to himself.

Phil took him up sharply.

“I see no mystery,” he said. “Heaps of girls do it. Why shouldn’t they make fools of old men as well as of young ones?”

Phil’s tone was aggressive enough, but truth to tell, he was feeling very sore.

“She couldn’t really have been in love with that other,” the Colonel muttered again.

“What other?” demanded Phil, turning upon him furiously, a sudden jealousy leaping like a flame to his eye.

“Winterdowne. They were a good deal together of late.”

“Winterdowne—bah!” And Phil turned upon his heel, and once more fixed his attention upon the barges and the river.

Whatever folly Edie might commit, she could not stoop to such folly as that. As well expect her to walk into the woods and fall in love with the first sapless fir-tree she came across as with such a dry, unsympathetic specimen of humanity as this middle-aged scientific peer.

Colonel Wickham’s doubts, however, were not to be easily allayed.

“It’s a mystery,” he again repeated. “If I could but believe that she really

cared for me, of course it would end the matter ; but——”

“So far as I am concerned, you may consider the matter ended,” said Phil nonchalantly, still with his back to his uncle and his eyes fixed on the river.

Why, there was a bargee, a low-looking, insolent fellow, tiller in hand, and a woman by his side, too! A bonnetless, hatless, unkempt-looking creature. Jacks and Jills everywhere! Great Heavens, what a lot of idiots there were in the world!

For a few moments there fell a silence between the two. Colonel Wickham began slowly walking up and down the room ; suddenly he stopped at Phil’s side, laying a hand on his shoulder.

“Phil — Phil,” he said, in a pained, vibrating tone, “choke down your pride ; come home with me and win your old love

back again! Take no refusal; make her give herself to you once more. Poor child! left to herself, she is bound to rush into misfortune and folly."

Phil turned a white, fierce face towards the Colonel. *

"Is she a bale of goods," he cried passionately, "to be handed from nephew to uncle, from uncle to nephew? Thank you, no; I decline such a family arrangement. Take your good fortune, sir, and make much of it. All I ask of you is, not to expect me to come down and be a spectator to it."

Then he walked away to his writing-table, seated himself, began opening and shutting drawers, took out a package of luggage-labels and began addressing them —the said labels were subsequently found to be illegible and were committed to the flames.

The Colonel recommenced his slow,

irregular walk up and down the room. His brain felt clouded and bewildered ; it could not settle itself to any steady, linked train of thought, but went jerking and zigzagging in odd, inconsequential fashion, just as it listed. After a time, things must clear themselves to him, and he would be able to think calmly over the whole state of affairs. For the nonce he must give it up.

Then he suddenly became aware of the nature of Phil's occupation. He paused in his walk, looking over the young man's shoulder.

"Are you starting off again, Phil ? Where to this time, and for how long ?"

"Can't say for certain. New Zealand, Algiers, the Cape, perhaps. I'll let you know when I've made up my mind."

"When do you start ?"

"To-night, perhaps, or to-morrow night, if you mean to stay and dine."

"No, I mean to get back by the six-

ten express. But why are you in such a hurry to set off on your travels again? Can't you stay on a week or two longer in town?"

No answer from Phil, only scratch, scratch went the pen, faster than ever.

The Colonel made another turn up and down the room, and then stopped again at Phil's side.

"Let me have a settled address as soon as possible, where your letters can be sent," he said. "You young fellows, when you start on your travels, go harum-scarum here, there, everywhere, and don't give a thought to the old fellows at home, who like a line now and then to hear how you are getting on."

"Never fear, you shall hear from me right enough," answered Phil, still scratching away with his magnum bonum.

Another turn the Colonel made, and then again came back.

“And, Phil,” he said, speaking in low, somewhat unsteady voice, “there’s one thing more. Supposing things are as you say—mind, I am only supposing—and Edie really does care for me after all; you may be quite sure she’ll be safe and happy in my keeping. Aye, as safe and happy as she would have been in yours.”

And Phil, recollecting the odd, wild, reckless love-making mornings he had got through the last two days, lifted up a white face, in which his eyes glowed and gleamed with an unnatural light, and answered recklessly, madly :

“Safer and happier a thousand times over than in my keeping, not a doubt !”

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE preservation of Uncle Hugh's serenity of temper was a task Ellinor detested, and yet one which from time to time she found herself compelled to take in hand. If only she could have kept a third maid to perform the tiresome office, she would have been quite willing to have assigned to her one of the slippers she herself was waiting to step into—in other words, have shared with her the handsome fortune she was expecting to accrue to her when Uncle Hugh died. Fatigue of heart she shunned as much as she did fatigue of body. The economy of the emotions was an art in which she was an adept.

“Why should I,” she had exclaimed to Lucy, as she had detailed to her another gusty interview with the old gentleman, “be compelled to smile and say pleasant things when I have no wish to say anything at all?”

And Lucy’s answer, an answer now that was beginning to be a sort of refrain to the duets these two sang together, had been :

“Oh, my darling, I wish I could do this for you — give your smiles as well as your tears when they are a task to you.”

Uncle Hugh was, for him, in a singularly tempestuous frame of mind just then. Like his beautiful niece he did not care to spend his soul over the small worries and anxieties of existence. To his way of thinking a gentleman should have the affairs of life made smooth and ready to his hand just as he had his dogs trained and his guns

loaded for him. He was willing enough that this, his favourite niece, should have her whims and wishes humoured to their fullest extent, always provided they were whims and wishes that did not run counter to his own, and for which he could experience a fair amount of sympathy. But somehow of late these two conditions did not appear to be fulfilled, a catastrophe, no doubt, for which Providence in part was to blame, in part Ellinor herself. Providence, for example, must be held responsible for Juliet's ill-health, the breaking-up of Mrs. Yorke's London home, and for the consequent unpleasant necessity of providing suitable quarters for Ellinor during the winter season; but Providence could in no sense be held to blame for the young lady's discontent with her suitable quarters when they had been found for her, nor for the whimsicalness of her conduct in taking flight from them, and establishing

herself, as she had, in quarters that were not so suitable, and with which unsuitability she, moreover, appeared entirely content.

“What you can find to do here morning, noon, and night, with Sir Peter and his wife always upstairs in armchairs or driving about the town looking after new doctors, is more than I can imagine,” he said, walking up and down the room with his thumbs in his waistcoat—like the pictures of old-fashioned gentlemen in *Punch*—and having visions meanwhile of a number of young men making themselves free of the house, and there being “the mischief to pay” afterwards.

“We eat, we drink, we sleep, we go out driving, occasionally we walk. I suppose we should do all these things whether Sir Peter and Lady Moulsey were upstairs or down,” answered Ellinor composedly.

By a coincidence this interview with

Uncle Hugh took place on the self-same morning that Phil had a few questions put to him by Colonel Wickham.

“Do you get any visitors? That’s what I want to know,” asked Uncle Hugh, stopping in front of her chair, and looking full at her. “Any confounded young fools who don’t know how to get rid of their time, and so come in here to make asses of themselves?”

Uncle Hugh had a large head—a distinctly pleasure-loving, money-spending head—but in stature he was somewhat dumpy. Nevertheless, as he said this, his neck elongated and his figure seemed to extend itself till one would have credited him with at least five feet ten inches of bone and muscle.

“Several of my mother’s old friends have been to see me—a Bishop of somewhere or other and his wife; a Sir Joseph someone—I’ve forgotten his name—and his wife.

I think he has something to do with the Post Office, or the Bank of England, or the British Museum—I'm not sure which. I don't know whether they belong to the class you name."

Uncle Hugh turned on his heel, and began walking up and down the room again.

Ellinor's coolness and self-possession under the fire of his crisp, blustering interrogatories always smoothed down his ill-humour. If she had snapped at him, or grown nervous and ill at ease under his cross-questioning, the chances were he would have cut her off with a shilling.

He came back from the other end of the long room with a calmer question :

"Now, Nell, you know perfectly well what I mean. Are there any of those lank-haired young idiots who call themselves poets, or any of those infernal R.A.'s dangling about the house? You know

there were whispers about you and young Thorne—that fool who didn't know how to handle a pistol—a little while ago. Of course there was not a word of truth in the reports—I know that—and no one with any sense in their heads believed them; but still I do not choose that such whispers should be set going—do you hear? I won't have you talked about in that way!"

Ellinor winced a little, but did not show it.

"Mr. Effingham has been here exactly three times to paint me as Gyneth, but I wrote to him last night, and told him he must not come again, as you did not approve of my giving sittings to such youthful members of his profession," she answered quietly.

"You did!"

"Yes; I told him you had a strong antipathy to R.A.'s, root and branch, but

more especially to the branch, and begged him to keep clear of the house for the future."

Uncle Hugh smiled a grim smile.

"That's about the most sensible thing you've ever done in your life, Nell ; you've saved me the trouble of speaking my mind to him," he said approvingly. "Now, what I want to know is when you're going to join your mother. I'm convinced that's the best thing you can do now. Sir Peter and his wife will light among their many doctors on a man who'll suddenly start them off for one of the Hesses or the 'Bads—confounded humbugs the whole lot are!—and I shall have you thrown on my hands again!"

He broke off for a moment, then added with an energy that left no room for doubt as to the sincerity of the wish :

"I wish to Heaven, Ellinor, you would make haste and bring off that fine match you're always talking about!"

“ My dear uncle, if ever I’m to make a fine match I must have some one to do the active and aggressive part of the arrangement for me. You don’t expect me to go out of my way to lay traps and snares for men. It wouldn’t suit me!”

Uncle Hugh chuckled :

“ It seems to me, without going very much out of your way, you contrive to do a fair amount of execution. But who, may I ask, young lady, do you expect to do the active and aggressive part for you? Not me, I hope, at my time of life.”

Ellinor’s reply was the languidly-put question :

“ Have you seen Lord Winterdowne lately? Will he be in town before Easter, do you think?”

Uncle Hugh gave a long, low whistle.

“ Oh, that’s it, is it? The wind sits in that quarter. My dear niece, I have seen Lord Winterdowne no later than yesterday,

when he was in town, presiding at a meeting of 'ologists of some sort, and there is not the least possibility of his being in town this side of Easter. So, awaiting that desirable event, the best thing you can do is to pack up your boxes and set off for the Riviera, in company with that little girl you've taken such a violent fancy for."

He was a dogged old man this Uncle Hugh, and went back terrier-like to his fads, like a dog to his bone.

Ellinor felt she must get this bone from between his teeth, though her fingers got bitten in the process.

"I'm not fit for a long journey just now," she said, with ever such a slight frown; "my cold has pulled me down a good deal, and the sight of Juliet and her many ailments would be sure to bring me still lower."

"Why, in Heaven's name, don't you go to a doctor if you feel as bad as all that?"

ejaculated the old gentleman irritably, yet with some real feeling below the irritability, for he could not forget how that his mother and two brothers had died of that self-same disease which had now Ellinor's sister in its fell grasp.

“Oh, I’m going, Uncle Hugh—I’m always going; but you know how I hate doctors—how the very sight of them sets me shivering and thinking of churchyards and all that—”

But Uncle Hugh interrupted her.

“Look here, Nell! it’s just this: if you don’t find a doctor for yourself, I shall do it for you, and see if there really is anything ailing you, or if it’s only one of your fancies. Why, medical registers must abound in this house. I should say the whole literature of the family consisted in them—”

“And in spectacle-makers’ and aurists’ catalogues,” finished Ellinor. “Very well,

Uncle Hugh, since you so particularly wish it, I'll find my way into a medical consulting-room one day next week, and let you know the result." And as she said this, the thought in her own mind was: "And he'll be the oddest doctor I shall ever have come across, if he doesn't lay it down as a necessity for my continued existence that I must remain in London right on till the end of the season."

Uncle Hugh went away mollified, leaving behind him his signature to a considerable amount.

Ellinor tossed the cheque over to Gretchen, and then fell to considering her plans—her ways and means for procuring success to her wishes—with the ease and practised thought of a Cabinet Minister who, having had his "grant" passed in both Houses, feels he has got his team well in hand again and grips the reins more tightly than ever.

It was all nonsense what Uncle Hugh had said about Lord Winterdowne, it had been said simply to throw her off the track, she said to herself; to her certain knowledge he would be in London presiding at scientific meetings (there were the advertisements in the papers) three times within the next ten days. Well, each of those three times Uncle Hugh must secure him either for luncheon before the meetings or for dinner afterwards, and for the play after that.

All that could be easily arranged, provided Uncle Hugh could be kept in a good humour.

To keep Uncle Hugh in a good humour it would be necessary for her to see a doctor.

Very well, then, the doctor could be made most useful by ordering her to remain in London under his care.

That could be easily arranged also.

And since this business of seeing a doctor had to be gone through, it might as well be gone through as speedily as possible—say to-morrow instead of next week or in ten days' time.

After all, matters were arranging themselves much more satisfactorily than they had seemed inclined to a little while ago. She had distanced Edie so easily with Phil, she had possibly somewhat under-rated a victory she had won without scratch or scar. Evidently Edie, though she could win her lovers, did not know how to keep them. As it had been with Phil, so should it be with Lord Winterdowne, or any other well-looking, tolerably distinguished individual to whose heart she, Ellinor Yorke, might choose to lay siege.

And as Ellinor sat thus, a mimic Alexander counting her worlds conquered and those which yet remained to overthrow, Lucy, coming into the room equipped for the

morning's drive, paid her as sweet a compliment as any the beauty had ever had offered at her shrine.

“ You have the loveliest colour in the world, dear, this morning,” she said as she buttoned her black kid glove, “ and your eyes are oh, so bright. You look as if somehow you had come into this world by mistake—I mean as though by right you belonged to another world where sorrow and pain, ugliness and death were words without meaning.”

Ellinor accorded her a gracious smile as she went out of the room to put on her own cloak and bonnet.

“ You never were nearer the truth in your life, Lucy,” she said in her low, clear voice. “ For me at this moment sorrow and pain, ugliness and death, are words without meaning.”

CHAPTER XXXVI.

“SING before breakfast, cry before night,” says the homely old proverb, and like most homely old proverbs, it is but a voice to thoughts which lie uppermost in many hearts. Some people put it another way—“If you get to the top of a hill, you must come down,” they say; “Laughing and crying are near neighbours,” and so forth. *Vox populi, vox Dei*, to the end of time.

Here is another example of the truth of these old homely adages. On the day after Colonel Wickham had held his reckoning with Phil, Lucy and Ellinor

went driving forth in the keen, frosty air, with bright eyes, rosy cheeks, and light hearts. Lucy was beginning to feel that though life for her must of necessity be painted in sober colours, yet sober colours were by no means sombre colours, and were by many shades removed from gloomy black. She was beginning somewhat to overcome her first terrible sense of bereavement, and, thanks to Mrs. Thorne's liberality, she had now a fair fortune at command. A fair fortune necessarily was a thing that opened the door to a good many pleasant probabilities and possibilities, and though she would have gladly enough surrendered it all for half-a-dozen kindly, heartfelt words from Rodney's mother, yet, nevertheless, it was not a thing to be despised. Besides, she had not yet given up all hopes of those half-dozen kindly words being spoken sooner or later. Some day she and Mrs. Thorne would be sure

to meet, and if once they could see each other face to face, and talk about Rodney, things must come right between them, not a doubt. Meantime she had the dearest, best, most beautiful woman in the world for friend and benefactress ; and she, too, was walking, so it seemed to her, day by day nearer and nearer to the goal on which her heart was set. What more in life could any one expect than what she, Lucy Selwyn, had and hoped for ?

These were some of the sources of Lucy's bright eyes and rosy cheeks. Ellinor's spring of joy did not lie quite so deep, was shallower, and ran in a narrower channel. " My beauty, my health, my wealth, my talent, my head-and-shoulders'-height above the common herd," its source ; " My success, my triumphs, my happiness," the great ocean to which it tended.

" Ah," cried Lucy, startled for once into poetry by the glimpse of the park, trees,

grass, pebbly paths, one mass of frost-jewels, "this is star-land itself. I hope heaven will be something like it!"

Ellinor nodded in the direction of big, bustling Piccadilly, towards which they were driving. "I hope heaven will be something like that," she said ; "but there, I would rather not talk of heaven to-day ; earth has far more attractions for me."

This was how they drove to the house of the esteemed medical practitioner, who was expected to endorse with professional authority every one of Ellinor's desires.

And this is how they returned. Two wan, sorrowful young women, one with tears running down her cheeks, the other as though she had suddenly been transformed into a marble likeness of herself ; leaning back in their carriage, saying never a word, shunning even a look one from the other's eyes.

All, forsooth, because the doctor, as he

had applied the stethoscope to Ellinor's chest, had said briefly :

“ There's mischief here. Get away to the south as fast as you can.”

Ellinor knew what the words meant well enough. She had heard them said over Juliet exactly a year ago, and her mother had wrung her hands, gone down on her knees in prayer, and had then risen up, broken up her home, and started for Italy.

“ Mischief here ! ” That meant the slow but sure creepings on of disease, the gradually increasing weakness, the terrible cough, the pantings for breath, the hunting about for warm, sheltered quarters, the fleeing before the breath of north or east wind, the eschewing of all pleasant places of resort —such as ball, theatre, reception-room—the huddling oneself up in wraps and respirators, the mere thought of which would drive a fairly healthy person frantic.

It meant the creeping out of the race of

life, the standing on one side to let the rush and crush of the sound and vigorous ones sweep past. It meant the bowing of the head, the turning of the face to the wall, and then the long, long sleep.

Ellinor clasped her hands over her forehead, and leaned back on her cushions, while something between a moan and a groan escaped her lips.

“ Oh, my darling ! ” began Lucy, turning towards her with clasped hands and streaming eyes.

“ Be silent ! ” interrupted Ellinor imperiously. “ Let me alone to think my own thoughts ; ” and then she went on, silently cataloguing, not those things which she might keep and hold for her own, but those things which she had best give up of her own free will, before Death, with its rude auctioneer’s hammer, transferred them to another lot, and knocked them down to a more fortunate bidder.

Winterdowne Castle, the coronet, the town house, the horses, the diamonds—these must be given up. They were the things that those who had years of life before them might try for and get; not those whose time was cut down to a few handfuls of months held in a loose, begrudging clasp.

And all hopes of triumphs over belles and beauties of future seasons must go too; all thoughts of winning lovers away from the sides of other girls, let them even be so provincial and insignificant as little Edie Fairfax.

What about Phil Wickham?

Breaking right over the head of her other thoughts came the question, sharply, imperatively, as one not to be put on one side without succinct answer.

It seemed to be repeated in even more distinct form as the carriage stopped at their own door, and the servant informed Ellinor

that Mr. Wickham was upstairs in the drawing-room waiting to see her.

“Will you see him?” asked Lucy, putting out a shaking hand from among her furs, and laying it on Ellinor’s arm. And her eyes said, “After this—after this, can you bear to see any one? Will you not go into some quiet corner and rest your heart?”

Ellinor shook off Lucy’s hand.

“I will see him, and alone—see that we are not disturbed, Lucy,” she answered almost defiantly. By-and-by, the conventions of her world would be defied and trampled underfoot by those uncouth, unmannerly churls, Disease and Death, who will bow to no written nor traditional laws of precedents and social etiquette; why not take a leaf out of their book and be beforehand with them, as though she, too, were a monarch, and made and snapped conventions at will.

As she entered the long, dreary, swathed-up drawing-room, Phil, seated in a far corner, thought that surely never before had living woman owned to so royal, so imperial a gait. A Cleopatra, a Vashti, a Juno even, might have looked shambling and *bourgeoise* by her side.

The blinds were drawn down. The room had an unaired, seldom-opened odour hanging about it. Ellinor's long seal mantle seemed to bring into it the fresh, frosty air of the morning.

Phil advanced to meet her.

"I have come to say good-bye!" he said. "I'm off to Paris, Brussels, Geneva, or somewhere or other, by to-night's mail-train."

There was nothing royal or imperial about his gait. By her side he showed as downcast, as pale-faced, as graceless, as it is possible for a well-knit, healthy young fellow of six-and-twenty to show.

Ellinor stood in front of him, looking straight at him with those beautiful, changeful, russet-brown eyes of hers. Twice her lips parted as though she would speak but could not. A whole troop of tumultuous thoughts, hopes, longings, despairs, seemed to go sweeping across her face like clouds across a noonday sky.

At last words came to her.

“It is I, not you, who should say good-bye,” she said wildly, impetuously, and then she sank on a near sofa, covering her face with both hands.

Phil was startled, troubled.

“What is it? What has happened? Tell me,” he asked anxiously.

Ellinor drew her hands from her face. It was blanched, bloodless, no cherry-red on lips nor glowing carnations on cheek now.

“Only this has happened,” she said in a low, strained voice. “Sentence of

death has been passed upon me. Nothing more."

"Sentence of death—on you! Great heavens, I do not understand!" stammered Phil.

"It is hard to understand, hard to believe, isn't it, that this I, sitting here talking to you, warm, breathing, living, will soon be put away out of sight, given up to the coffin, and the clay, and the worms?"

And Ellinor laughed a long, low laugh, all the time without a gleam of colour in lip or cheek, or the light of mirth in her eye.

"Good heavens, I do not believe it!" cried Phil vehemently.

That grand woman seated there in her furs, young, supremely beautiful, with warm, quick blood coursing through her veins, to be coffined and hidden away! Better doubt his own senses, his power of hearing and reasoning at once.

“I do not believe it—I will not believe it!” he cried again. “It is all some frightful mistake — it is not — cannot be true !”

“If you like to go to one of those admirable physicians whose name was in the list you gave me the other day, he will tell you that it can be and is true. Shall I give you his name and address ?”

Phil drew a long breath.

“If the whole College of Physicians were to swear to it, yet I would not believe it,” he said. “But at present, so far as I can see, it is only the opinion of one man that has been asked and had. Miss Yorke, you must not believe that this man’s opinion is final. There are at least fifty or sixty as good as he. You must go to others, and hear what they have to say.”

“Thank you. I have no wish to prolong the hideous prelude to the coffin and the worms ;” she paused a moment, then

added in the same unnaturally calm voice : “ Come, let us talk of something else. You are going away, when—where to ? Did you tell me just now ? I have forgotten.”

Fancy a condemned criminal turning round upon the scaffold and addressing a party of tourists with “ Have you your fishing-rods, gentlemen ? I hope you will get good sport.”

Phil seated himself on the sofa beside her.

“ I cannot talk of myself,” he said ; “ I feel bewildered—as though I were in the midst of a hideous nightmare.”

“ Ah, you will soon get used to the thought, face it, and then forget all about it. Yes, forget—forget—” She broke off, and then added in a more real, more natural tone than she had yet used : “ Yes, that is the hardest, bitterest part of all, the being forgotten. I could stand being hated, abhorred, shunned, but the being forgotten is awful. For people to

forget even what your face is like, how you looked when you were happy, how you looked when you were sad, how your voice sounded——”

Again she broke off. It seemed as though by thus cataloguing one by one the terrors of the grave she was trying to bring herself to face them and to look away their hideousness.

Phil felt choking.

“There are some voices, some faces, that can never be forgotten by those who have once heard or seen them.” And, as he said this, it seemed to him that that white, beautiful face he was gazing at now so earnestly, so pityingly, must haunt him for evermore, sleeping, waking, no matter in what corner of the world he might hide, nor into what mad whirls of business or pleasure he might throw himself.

Ellinor did not seem to hear him. She had pulled off her gloves, and went on talking, half to herself, half to him, as she

looked down on and caressed her long, white, shapely hands.

“I’ve always taken such care of them—slept in gloves, covered them with ‘crème de l’impératrice,’ and now I must give them up to the clay and the worms. Poor hands! Fancy you after you have lain in the grave a month! ‘Crème de l’impératrice’ wouldn’t be much good to you then.”

Phil jumped to his feet.

“For Heaven’s sake, stop!” he cried. “I cannot bear it! You’ll drive me mad if you talk in this way.”

She caught at his last word.

“Mad!” she said; “mad! If madness and death came hand-in-hand, half of the horrors of death would be gone. But they don’t, do they, as a rule? No. We go down into the vaults open-eyed, open-eared; we know all about it; we’ve seen others go there before us; we know what becomes of them— But I forgot, you don’t like to hear about these things. Why should

you? They are a long way off from you. Come, let us talk of something else. Sit down, and tell me where you are going first."

Phil, with something of a groan, sank down on the sofa again. But speech refused to come to his lips.

Ellinor went on :

"I am glad you are going away. Shall I tell you why I am glad? I may as well speak the truth to you now. I am glad, because it puts us both, you and I, on one footing. We stand on one platform now."

Phil, in his amazement, turned half round on the sofa and faced her.

"I do not understand—I do not know what you mean," he stammered.

Ellinor removed her seal hat, and pushed her thick, low-growing hair from her brows. Colour had come back to her face. Her voice was calm and natural.

"I will explain," she said composedly. "What I meant to say was, we are on a level now, you and I; you are no longer

in a pulpit high over my head preaching to me a miserable sinner at your feet. No ; you have come down from your pulpit into the dust and done just exactly what the miserable sinner did."

There came a hot guilty rush of blood to Phil's face, but he stammered again :

"I do not see—I do not understand."

"What, I have not yet made my meaning plain ! Perhaps your memory may help you to understand. You cannot yet have forgotten our meeting in the shrubbery at Stanham, and our talk about Rodney Thorne ? How eloquently you preached to me on my lack of heart, told me how I had led your friend on to love me without a spark of love for him in my heart ; how——"

But here Phil jumped to his feet with a bitter cry :

"Stop—in Heaven's name, stop ! You don't know what you are saying," he said in a choking voice. " You do not—cannot

mean to say that as you trifled with Rodney so have I trifled with you."

White, forlorn, half-distraught, yet withal sharply conscience-smitten, he stood in front of her, looking down at her calm, all-but smiling face.

"I do mean to say it," she answered, serenely returning his gaze. "As I spent long mornings with Rodney, giving him pleasant words, pleasant looks which meant nothing; so have you spent long mornings with me, trifling with me, giving me sweet, pleasant words and looks, with all the while not one grain of love in your heart for me. If it were not so, how could you go away and leave me now in my sore extremity?"

The last words were said plaintively, piteously.

"May God forgive me!" groaned Phil, clenching his fingers into the palms of his hands, till, white and bloodless, naught but sinews and outstanding veins seemed to show in them. "I was mad, I think. I

knew not what I was doing. I came because my heart was broken—my brains were going.”

Then in his agony he knelt on the ground at her feet, hiding his face in the hem of her dress, and crying aloud :

“Oh, Ellinor, have mercy upon me, pity me if it be possible! I do not—dare not ask you to forgive me.”

She stooped over him low, lower, till her dark head almost rested on his fair one.

“I forgive you,” she said sweetly ; “I will admit the plea you would not admit for me, poor sinner! I will say, how could he help it, being what he was ?”

Phil lifted up a white wondering face to the calm beautiful one that bent over his.

“Being what he was,” she went on in the same sweet, low tone as before ; “so handsome, so noble, so true ; what wonder if she loved him, and broke her heart over him ?”

Phil groaned again, and kneeling still, covered his face with both hands.

Ellinor’s next words came in a whisper :

“ I would not dare speak to you thus had I years of life before me, but with my death-sentence still in my ears, what can it matter what I say ? ” Her voice ended brokenly.

Phil drew his hands slowly from his face. Their eyes were close together now ; his filled with a wild, dumb look of pain, hers with the dancing light of love. Their lips were close also ; hers curved, pouting, rosy-red, and ripe for kissing, his gray and bloodless.

Then all on a sudden there seemed to come a mist and darkness before Phil’s eyes, a rush of blood to his brain, a sound as of ten thousand loud voices in his ear. Did her lips first touch his, or his hers ? He could not say—he did not know ; he only knew they met in one long, lingering, passionate kiss, and that there, as he knelt at her feet, she fell upon his neck crying, “ Oh my love, my love ! I find you, I lose you, in one breath ! ”

END OF VOL. II.

[January, 1885.



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